

‘Sindi Oberio, The Nowhere Man’: In Arun Joshi’s Novel “The Foreigner”

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In the Post-Independence era, the growth of Indian English literature has been fast. It has been accepted all over the world and has been drawing the attention of critics both in native and abroad. It has given rise to number of writers who have been successfully winning acclaim in the world literature. As Viney Kripal point out, “If international acclaim is any measure of literary merit, then it is fascinating to note that almost every second novel of the 80’s has been awarded a prize or has been shortlisted for it.”²¹

The one’s identity finds its ancestry in the culture in which one lives and hence estrangement from the culture leads to the loss of one’s socio-cultural identity. It is in a true sense that the perception constitutes individual identity through reminiscences. But even here it is important how one projects oneself and one’s self-image in search of an identity or else one becomes ‘nowhere man’. Arun Joshi one of the prominent novelists of the Post-Independence era brings out such a new perspective in his first novel “*The Foreigner*”. The novel speaks about modern mans plight. The most common problem that modern man faces these days is the problem of the inner feeling of seclusion as he is nowhere in this world—no identity of his own, very much detached from the surrounding society, be in any part of the world. Such a feeling generally bothers man because there is hardly any idea of purpose in life that supports him to make his living and existence meaningful. And such thing is possible when there is no meaningful relationship with other human beings. As Erich Fromm says, “The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots, who will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand.....a meaningless life.”²²

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Sindi Oberio, the character of the novel "*The Foreigner*" presents modern man's predicament—a stigma for today's youth—"alone in darkness." The present article intends to study this concept of 'the nowhere man' in the novel through the character of Sindi Oberio who always feels himself as 'the nowhere man' of this world. He becomes a wondering alien finds himself related to no one and nowhere in this world. Speaking of this character O. P. Bhatnagar observes, "A strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness....permeates the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure in the novel."³

Sindi Oberio, a product of mixed culture and religion comes before the readers as a man of confusion as he expresses, "Any way I can't really be called a Hindu. My mother was English and my father, I am told a sceptic." (33) His feeling of seclusion and nowhere man begins from childhood with the death of his parents at the age of four. He is by destiny deprived of parental love. He was born at Nairobi (Kenya), brought up by his uncle. He completed his schooling in Kenya and Engineering in England, then to a night club in Soho where he worked as dishwasher, to Scotland where he worked at a small village library and discussed religion, god and mysticism with a catholic priest, to Boston, did doctorate in Boston, to America for job and finally to India to settle down. But he however, failed to establish in him a sense of meaningful existence. This feeling of seclusion and 'nowhere man' though began from childhood he was unable to come out of it. His nature of irresolution and inaction made him secluded from the surrounding wherever he lived. R. S. Singh rightly pointed out, "His alienation is not so much geographical or physical, as spiritual as it is born out of the crisis of conscience. He could not therefore, develop any emotional attachment to any place, person, or thing."⁴

The reader is found to show concern to the character of Sindi Oberio of his multi-cultured milieu because of which inspite of being employed in America he was unable to acquaint himself well with others. Instead there was more a feeling of detachment than attachment. There was a feeling in him that he neither belongs to any person nor any country. His in depth feeling is that he is 'nowhere man'. Even after his coming to Delhi he still felt as an outsider, "I was considered a quite a misfit. My

foreign background stood against me.”(15) Unable to mingle with people easily and in order to experience the seclusion “ran into a lone beauty hidden away in this crowd of obesity.”(16) He failed to get the feeling of belongingness in the midst of the crowd “I drank and watched the crowd bob up and down in the huge mirror behind the bar. All those faces distort in the cheap mirror made me feel even more an alien.”(23) It was this detachment nature of his that he was cut off from the human world and felt that he may never be successful in developing attachment. But sometimes his heart yearned for human communication, “I wished I could talk to somebody.”(25) This outlandish nature of Sindi June Blyth clearly ventilates, “There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant I would guess that when people are with you they don’t feel like they are with a human being. May be it’s an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you’d be a foreigner everywhere.”(33) His parentage, childhood life, diverse culture and the feeling of insecurity made him to develop the feeling of ‘nowhere man’ which also made him to avoid marriage and familial relationships, “I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed and marriage meant both.”(106)

Sindi’s unsafe and secluded life dislikes him to love others as well as be loved by others. He admits, “I was not the kind of man one could love. I had learnt that long ago.”(38) With such behaviour he ensnared himself in seclusion and finds himself a ‘nowhere man’. Again it is these attitudes that generated in him the fear of involvement, “I don’t want to get involved. I repeated myself. Everywhere I turned I saw involvement.”(170) Speaking on his own ridiculous existence he says, “I wondered in what way, if any did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody has begotten me without a purpose....Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matters? It seems to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn’t leave myself wherever I went.”(61)

After this frustrated relationship with Anna and Kathy, Sindi goes to a small village in Scotland. There in the discussion with the catholic priest he started feeling, “All love, whether things persons or oneself,

was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment and it lead to possession.”(171) this developed in Sindi a new understanding, “You can love without attachment, without desire. You can love without attachment to objects of your love.” (171) although he had number of affairs in England he did not had any kind of attachment. Even after June came in his life he often kept himself away from this emotional attachment. He never had the intention of marrying June. Marriage according to him was, “one big illusion that has been pounded into them by the society. For a while they go around bloated with their own pride imagining things which just are not there. And then gradually the whole thing crumbles and they began to kill each other bit by bit.”(106) Besides, Babu’s death had a psychological effect on his mind which made him forlorn. He has the inner feeling of self that aroused in his mind the variance, “I worked in New York for a few weeks, just enough to finish the project I had started. As it happened after Babu’s death the laboratory provided me a sanctuary where I could forget my conflicts, at least at the conscious level. But in the inner recesses of the mind the trial went on. Each day the judges met and examined the witnesses. My parents, my uncle, my lovers, Babu and June their parents and finally myself, one by one all were called by the invisible judges and asked to give their evidence. Under normal conditions this would have been painful but after this shock of June’s death it came as a great therapeutic process. I felt as if some indefatigable surgeon was cleansing up my soul with the sharp edge of his scalpel.”(195)

Sindi often and again felt there is something that he wanted to accomplish, “I wanted the courage to live without desire and attachment. I wanted peace and perhaps a capacity to love....Above all , I wanted to conquer pain what I could have done....if the ball of pain still hung around my neck like a dead albatross? (146). This expression of Sindi unknowingly makes himself ‘a nowhere man’—craving for something unable to discern, keeping himself away from the society with the feeling of guilt that he was accountable for all what has happened in his life. He physically wants to possess everything and everyone but emotionally he has secluded himself from human relationships. Even while speaking of his relationship with Kathy, he replies to June’s question,

‘Did you love her?’

‘No I had only wanted to possess her.’ (67)

So also his relationship with June was particularly for her physical body, “I wanted to possess her as I had never wanted to possess anyone before.”(71) But probably the memory of Anna and Kathy does not allow him to develop a congenial relationship with June. His fear of being possessed made him emotionally secluded and the inner feeling of ‘nowhere man’. Unable to feel and experience his existence he even thought of committing suicide. His prance from one land to another is an escape from the heavy taxation of line, lands him nowhere, “Like many of my breed, I believed erroneously that I could escape from a part of myself by hopping from one land to another.”(176).

It is this attitude of life (emotional detachment) that made him feel insecure. When one clearly understands the character of Sindi, his mind, his behaviour and his sayings, there are a lot of contradictions on what he says and what he does. Perhaps his lust became the cause of his seclusion to become ‘a nowhere man’ and also his ruin. He expresses, “Marriage wouldn’t help June. We are alone both you and I that is the problem. And our aloneness must be resolved within.....The statue of Liberty promises you this optimism. But in my world I have no escape, June. I just have no escape.” (126)

Sindi is in a quandary between what he is and what he desires in life. This is because of his feeling of a ‘nowhere man’. He was born in Kenya but he was not an African, nor did his parents belong to Africa. He was not an Englishman because his father was an Indian, neither a Scottish, because it was his escape from his affairs with Anna and Kathy. Nor he was an American because he came for a job. Nor an Indian because he still has to find the roots of his forefathers of which he is ignorant. He often had the feeling that he is moving in a large desert unable to find the land of man which can be seen in his thoughts which he expressed over the death of Babu, “Babu had kicked out all my beliefs and disproved all my theories. I felt like a desert or like a vast field of naked oaks in winter time. I felt more alone and naked in the world that I had ever felt before.....The feeling of nakedness in the hands of

existence grew with every passing day and strong urge possessed me to once again roam the streets of the world. I didn't know where I would go or what the future held for me, but one thing was certain: my search had continued...I only wanted a place where I could experiment with myself.”(175)

His isolation turns him cynical, “I was cynical and exhausted, grown old before my time, weary with my own loneliness.”(152) and often he feels that his life is aimless because he never apprehended the importance of emotional human attachment which unknowingly he craved for but failed to realize it, “Look at me, I have no roots. I have no system of morality....I have no reason to be one thing rather than another.....I don't even have a reason to live.”

Sindi finally comes to India and gets a job in Khemka's office. When Khemka's business was in problem after the arrest of Khemka, he again started feeling secluded. However, Muthu convinces him who takes on the charge of Khemka's business and saves the hapless lot of people from starvation. Though he becomes a man of action, in a true sense finds a direction and purpose of life. Yet he is still a stranger to India and himself for he is yet to develop in himself the feeling of emotional human attachment. And emotionally he still lands in a 'nowhere land'. It was merely the physical attachment that he has developed in India.

Towards the end Sindi realises that one cannot live for oneself alone because no human act is performed in isolation and without consequences. Realizing his precedent mistakes he says, “We could have acted more responsibly, with greater detachment. And if I had been more irresponsible than any of them, that too was a result of randomness. Circumstances and events had let my detachment from all of them. But as Shiela had pointed out, I could not be detached from the world and remain attached to myself. The long dark journey of the past had been an attempted escape from the entanglements only to allow my passion a freer rein.”(221)

Thus, Sindi represents the present human predicament of man, the absurdity of situation, and the human struggle against nothingness. The writer Arun Joshi powerfully expressed the reality of life that in the

growing covetousness and man's attitude for money has isolated him from the society as well as himself and of his existence finding himself 'a nowhere man' denounced by his self hallucination.

References

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