

Significance Of The Recurrent Symbols In Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*: A Critical Study

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Abstract

*Arun Joshi is one of the most popular contemporary novelists. He presents the reality of human predicament through his artistic use of continually evolving symbolic patterns in his novels. His use of recurrent symbols in *The Foreigner* lends significance to the ideas and events that are presented in the novel. Arun Joshi uses a number of symbols to delineate the complex dilemmatic situation of a man caught in the labyrinths of loneliness and dejection. In *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi weaves the story around the life of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi who is presented as enmeshed in the solitary, sad, and virtually insignificant life in the early phases. The novelist uses symbolism to aesthetically depict his emotions, feelings, and thoughts in the process. Almost all the experiences of Sindi Oberoi have been presented in correlation with other characters in the novel.*

*All the symbols used in *The Foreigner* are comprehensive, and multi-hued to make the fabric of life full of charm. Sindi Oberoi declares that his life has been "alone in the darkness." (Joshi 189) Right from the beginning of his life Sindi Oberoi symbolizes the Existential Everyman of our time because he is constantly disturbed by a strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness and thinks himself to be a perennial outsider. In *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi quite symbolically presents the scenes, episodes and situations etc. and opens the novel on a significantly symbolic note.*

Keywords

Contemporary, labyrinths, automation, enmeshed, rootlessness, belongingness.

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Introduction

Arun Joshi is one of the most popular contemporary novelists. In his novels, he expresses his concern for the moral and spiritual issues of the people of contemporary India. He mostly deals with the problems of post-independence Indians who have left their country for abroad to pursue higher studies. In a foreign land, they become a prey to loneliness and thus form a society of alienated people. Arun Joshi presents the reality of human predicament through his artistic use of continually evolving symbolic patterns in his novels. The use of recurrent symbols in his novels lends significance to the ideas and events that are presented in his novels.

In his novel *The Foreigner* (1968), Arun Joshi uses a number of symbols to delineate the complex dilemmatic situation of a man caught in the labyrinths of loneliness and dejection. Through the regular use of symbols, he adequately expresses the inner significance and implications of human experience. In a broader sense, in *The Foreigner*, the novelist deals with the existentialist situation of the modern people. He delineates the turns in the functioning and progress of the contemporary man's psyche.

In *The Foreigner* Arun Joshi weaves the story around the life of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi who is presented as enmeshed in the solitary, sad, and virtually insignificant life in the early phases. The novelist uses symbolism to aesthetically depict his emotions, feelings, and thoughts in the process. Almost all the experiences of Sindi Oberoi have been presented in correlation ship with other characters in the novel. There is a constant interaction of scenes and events, which are depicted through variegated symbols. All the symbols used in the novel are comprehensive, and multi-hued to make the fabric of life full of charm.

In the very beginning of the discussion on the use of symbols in *The Foreigner* can be found in the very name of the protagonist Sindi which has a geek origin and means 'from mount Kynthos' which in conceptual sense means rootless, restless, and luckless in a mad, bad and absurd world. In a highly persuasive phrase full of symbolic connotations, Sindi Oberoi declares that his life has been "alone in the darkness." (Joshi 189) Right from the beginning of his life Sindi Oberoi symbolizes the Existential Everyman of our time because he is constantly disturbed by a strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness and thinks himself to be a perennial outsider. Dr. Mohd. Shafi Dar, while commenting on Arun Joshi's use of symbols to express the existential dilemma of Sindi, writes:

He appears before us as a perennial outsider, a person who can have no respite from movement. This phenomenon of Sindi's incessant journeying is symbolized by the incessant movement of a leaf in the storm. He had gone to the

U.S.A. for higher studies but instead of continuing there, he drifted back to India but here too he is no better than a stranger, a foreigner. In this connection, it must be noted that the two countries are characterized as two living and throbbing entities. In terms of meaning the two countries symbolize a trap in the form of distracting forces of evil and indifference causing traumatic experiences in people's lives. SindiOberoi's sense of being a completely alien and stranger in the U.S.A. is characterized by the description of America as "a place for well-fed automation rushing about in automatic cars." Conditions in India are not favorable either and in symbolic terms, SindiOberoi is appalled by "the stagnant deadness"... of the country. All in all Sindi's mood of despair and alienation is symbolized by the analogy of his being surrounded by vagueness and uncertainty. While America is characterized by "automation" India is signaled by "darkness." (Dar 984)

Arun Joshi Makes Sindi Remark

I saw myself as I had always been. An uprooted young man living in the latter half of the 20th century who had become detached from everything except myself (Joshi 195)

Sindi continuously faces the miserable plight and is torn by his concerns of loneliness, and alienation from his own culture. He comes face to face with pain and feels that this pain has gone deeper into himself.

Life has become empty and hollow. It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without... voids of caves and voids of the sky...(Joshi 179-80)

He expresses his disappointment at every juncture of life when he wanders from one place to another, and of course from one woman to another. His continuous movements from place, have been symbolized by the drifting of a leaf in a storm. He visits America to achieve higher education but there he is tormented by the sense of rootlessness that obliges him to return to India. But the dilemma is that now in his own country he also faces the same situation of being alone and rootless. This odd situation of a person in two countries has been symbolically described by the novelist as the image of two several places permeated with a similar necessary sense. These two countries have been presented as the symbols of the trap of the distracting forces of evil and indifference causing problematic occurrences in the life of the people. Sindi's emotions which make him think of himself as a foreigner in America; have been symbolized by the description of America as "a place for well-fed automation rushing about in automatic cars." (Joshi 90) Surprising enough for Sindi, things in India are almost the same as he has become an alien person in his own country symbolically like "the stagnant deadness" (Joshi207) of the place.

Thus the disappointments and dejection of Sindi get symbolized by the analogy of his being surrounded by vagueness and uncertainty of sustenance as it happens in the case of fish surrounded by water.

With the development of the story, we see that Sindi wanders from place to place; at present, he is in Delhi where he feels that he has eventually settled but finds that he is moving back and leaving for Nairobi where he had witnessed the light of the day. Delhi or Nairobi are not the only places where he visits, London, Soho, Scotland, and Boston are also the places visited by him. All these places, cities and countries symbolize his experience at different stages in the chequered history of his life. During his visit to these places, he is obliged to work in different capacities such as a dishwasher, a bar man, a petty employee in a small village library, a student who has been acquainted with a number of persons like Nune Blyth, BabuRaoKhemka etc. Hence we see that Sindi is enmeshed in the sufferings of a person who is an outsider. His moving restlessly symbolizes his being an outsider everywhere. He utters:

You had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. (Joshi 143)

The above-mentioned Sindi's remark shows that "forgiveness lies within him" (The Foreigner 61). It is obvious that Sindi's failure to solve the predicament has been symbolized here in the words which are spoken by him to June Blyth: "Our aloneness must be resolved from within" (126); it again symbolizes his disappointment at the relationships which are quite deep and are on a wider scale. In the same manner, the perturbed self of Sindi has been depicted through the symbol of "a battlefield where the child and adult warred unceasingly" (130). Once again we see that the novelist presents the failure of Sindi's endeavor to unify himself with things and persons symbolically by making the comparison of things dying down "like an ill-packet cracker." (139)

Sindi's rootlessness, confusion and disorientation have again been symbolically presented through his coming across a small artist Anna who has also faced the same rootlessness in his life as she has been separated from her husband. Sindi's contact with the Soho artist has also symbolical significance in the way it highlights his alienation and rootlessness compared to the artist who neither desires for fine things, nor she wishes to have good relations with human beings; she only yearns "for her lost youth." (167) Another recurrence of the symbol can be found in the description of Sindi's rootlessness compared to the pathless road to New York. Once again, Sindi's reference to the certain lines from a popular song has great symbolical significance:

Who knows where, the road will lead? Only a fool can say. (196)

After recalling this song, he begins to ponder over the meaninglessness of his existence symbolically represented by the words “an idiot without a keeper.” (163) Similarly, Sindi’s miserable plight at the death of BabuRaoKhemka gets symbolized by his comparison of himself to “a desert or like a vast field of naked oaks in the winter time” (175) In fact, he holds himself responsible, though indirectly, for the untimely death of his beloved June and his friend Babu. In a symbolically significant way, he makes an attempt at his own realization and remarks:

I saw myself as I had always been. An uprooted young man living in the latter half of the 20th century who had become detached from everything except myself... Wouldn’t Babu still be living if I had not surrendered my body to June that night we went out for a ride? I thought I was acting out of detachment but was it not merely a desire to prove that I still held the key to June’s happiness? (195)

At another place, Arun Joshi symbolically presents Sindi’s continuous meaninglessness when he compares Sindi’s life to walking “around the huge circle like a sleep-walker in an amphitheater.” (208)

In *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi quite symbolically presents the scenes, episodes and situations etc. and opens the novel on a significantly symbolic note. In the very first scene, we come across a mortuary where the protagonist Sindi reaches to recognize the dead body of BabuRaoKhemka who has lost his life in a car accident. The novelist uses instantly the symbols of sorrow and death when Sindi goes to the mortuary to identify the body of BabuRaoKhemka. The moment he casts a look at the dead body of BabuRao, feels as if he has come across-

...a dark bottomless hole gaping in place of the right eye. The sensual upper lip was gone, leaving behind a horrible grin that showed no sign of ending. (ArunJoshi 1)

Immediately, the author tells us that Sindi begins to feel exhaustion in his legs. Sindi remarks that tiredness in his legs is “turning them to stone. My eyes felt overly dry and my throat contracted.”(2) Anyhow he files the papers and starts going out but the clerk suggests to he to call a cab. At this, he retorts, “I did not know where I was going so there was no point in calling a cab.” (2)Sindi’s this remark symbolically means that life is without any meaning; it is no better than a mockery.

After this, he reaches the house of BabuRao where he sees that his relatives are weeping extremely sorrowfully. But he finds irony in the fact when BabuRao’s son had died, Babu had shown no emotions, rather he had taken the death with a calm resignation. Now Arun Joshi ironically points to the fact that Babu Rao and

his sister Sindi to have a drink with them. Now the novelist symbolically compares the luxuriously and tastefully furnished drawing room with “low streamlined diwans... and sculpture.” (11) Yet again, the novelist presents these contrasts of Mr. Khemka’s riches to symbolically depicted through the extreme poverty of the family of Mutu who is a low paid employee in Khemka’s office. The novelist compares the residences of two persons with symbols; Khemka owns “three houses in New Delhi and a Villa in Mussoorie” (21), while Muthu lives in a single room shared by a dozen other tenants. Sindi, after seeing the miserable conditions of Muthu’s family, comes to realize his own plight which he symbolizes with “accumulated despair of...weary lives” (Joshi 226) of people who are around him. The description of the squalor of the place gets symbolized with poor man’s hunger, anxiety, helplessness etc. This further is symbolically intensified when Sindi charges Khemka of the scam “those miserable wretches in rags who push carts on your streets and die at twenty-five.” (215)

In *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi, quite successfully creates symbolic design through scenes and episodes, which get connected with the characters by using the symbols of a fascinating spectacle, an occupation and entertainment for the eyes. The author goes on to take and treat these spectacles and occupation at once equal and piquant to the extent of communicating the reality aesthetically. The author also gets success in intermingling the scenes and events with the past and the present of his characters and symbolically exposes the depths and the factors of the anxiety, sorrow and exhaustion of his characters. This is the reason that the reader finds meaningful symbolism in the dislocation of Sindi from Delhi to Boston and several other places in the present times as well as in the past in an unpredictable manner. Madhu Sudan Prasad praises Arun Joshi’s command and accomplishment in applying symbols; he remarks that Arun Joshi has “a vast range of wide variety of scenes for symbolic presentation. (Prasad 51)

In *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi not only details the complete chart of Sindi Oberoi’s dislocation from one place to another in symbols, but he also presents a graph of the movement of Sindi from the state of simplicity to that of complexity through a number of symbols. Sometimes, someone, who thinks of himself as a rootless person, becomes too stubborn due to the agonies of existence. But, Sindi, has active germs of a soft heart and keenness to extend his helping hand to others. He helps Babu Rao at the Foreign Student Centre when he comes to join college in Boston. Sindi’s this desire of helping others becomes more symbolically obvious when he meets and requests the Dean not to turn Babu out for not performing well and getting success in his studies. The author, on another occasion, symbolically

presents Sindi's desire of helping June when she visits comes to his place while he is absent, and she leaves a message for a meeting with him urgently, and he at once visits her with a resolution to marry her but to his surprise, she has already died when he reaches there.

As Sindi has labored under misnomers for quite a long time, he is misled in his life but gradually he gains experience while facing conflicts and adventures in his life, and so develops a sense of realization in himself. Mohd. Shafi Dar remarks:

For quite a long time Sindi Oberoi had lived under misnomers. But after many conflicts and adventures, he is able to gather experience. These conflicts are also symbolically drawn. Sindi says that his conflicts have been internal rather than external and that the conflict has been between "the saint and the lusty beast."... This teaches him a sense of detachment from everything that happens around him. (Arun Joshi's Use of Symbolism in *The Foreigner* 985-86)

Now Sindi has attained maturity of mind and can distinguish illusion from reality and know that "The wheel of Karma like the wheel of industrialization never stops." (*The Foreigner* 170) he now begins to feel a kind of growth in his own personality as he symbolizes his realization that "detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it." (*The Foreigner* 193) it means that Sindi should get himself involved with the world meaning he should not escape from the world and that he should establish his contact with the realities of the world.

Towards the end of the novel *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi symbolically depicts the final phase of Sindi Oberoi's character and life. Now a very significant change can be discerned in the attitude of Sindi when he meets Muthu which symbolically tells him how to understand human life and how to pursue it. In fact, the novelist wants to bring home the point that Sindi's decision of making efforts to comprehend and pursue the life by following humanitarianism and boldness, is symbol of a huge change in his attitude and growth. Now he decides to help the poor and the helpless like Khemka's family members, who have fallen on evil days. This is the reason that he cancels his visit to Bombay when the helpless workers of Mr. Khemka's factory request him not to leave them. This is the impact of a big change in his life and attitude that he gives up his lucrative job offered to him in Bombay. This is the symbol of his control over himself and getting rid of lust. Even his servant is taken aback when Sindi unpacks his luggage and puts the things in their usual place. Sindi remarks:

After dinner, much to the surprise of my servant, I unpacked my things and put them back as nearly as possible in their old places. (*The Foreigner* 226)

This decision symbolizes the huge change that has occurred in his life and it signifies his returning to normal.

In fact, Sindi has found symbolically a new sense of belongingness. It also symbolizes that he has got success in his search for the real meaning in life. Now he plunges headlong into the battle of existence, which is being fought by the workers who finally win on account of the support and cooperation of Sindi. Eventually, Sindi's transcending self-interest is symbolized by his resolution to imbibe new vigor and life into the derelict business of Khemka and to extend his helping hand to all other employees working there in the factory. To conclude, we may quote J. VenkateswarRao who rightly remarks:

SindiOberoi's transcendence is clear in his detached and yet compassionate commitment to work in order to involve himself meaningfully in the community. He has towards the end found a heaven after the vigorous quest for meaning that has shaped his life and tormented his psyche. (The Foreigner: An Existential Dilemma, The Foreigner: An Existential Dilemma wisdomlib.org)

Thus to conclude it can be said that Arun Joshi, in his novels, portrays the problems of post-independence Indians who migrate to foreign countries with the purpose of gaining higher education. In the novel *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi through the use of a number of symbols, delineates the complex dilemmatic situation of people entrapped in the labyrinths of alienation and disappointments. His recurrent use of evolving symbols exposes the reality of human predicament and lends significance to the ideas and events which are depicted in his novels. In this novel, the author exposes the existential dilemma of the modern people and successfully lay bare the contemporary man's psyche which is torn and dejected. In *The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi, with the help of symbols, weaves the story of the protagonist SindiOberoi's enmeshed, solitary, sad and insignificant life. His use of symbols provides an aesthetic description of his emotions, passions and thinking process very elaborately. Almost all the scenes and events have been described by the author through the deployment of variegated symbols. The character SindiOberoi has been presented through highly persuasive phrases of symbolic connotations as an Existential Everyman of our time because his psyche is torn a queer feeling of loneliness and aloofness as if he is a perennial outsider.

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