



‘Victims of Gendered Portrayals’: Female Characters in the Selected Fiction of Arun Joshi

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to read the female characters in the fiction of the Indian English novelist Arun Joshi as victims of gendered portrayals. The protagonists of Joshi's fiction are anti-heroes with questionable morals and characterized by a twisted idealism in whose wake of destruction the female characters simply by dint of their gender are almost always sidelined and victimized. A looming sense of doom preordains those seeking fulfillment in Joshi's dystopic world and as such the female characters, mostly relegated to traditional and stereotypical gender roles, have no say or choice in the unfolding of their destinies. They are simply a means to an end – for the protagonist to arrive at a certain stage in his life, and for the writer to depict the absurdity of materialistic existence which degrades the souls of the protagonists. This paper will examine the gender-biasedness in the depiction of the female characters in the three novels by Arun Joshi, namely, *The Last Labyrinth*, *The Foreigner* and, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* with a view to bring them to the foreground to highlight their suffering, limitations imposed by their gendered portrayals and suppressed voices. Such foregrounding of the female characters will also serve to expose the hypocrisies of male character portrayals in patriarchal texts as well as in their analyses and criticisms.

Keywords: Gender, Female, Patriarchy, Victim, Suppression.

Introduction

Talking about victimization of women by dint of their gender, Joshi's fiction shows us women in both the modern world as well as the tribal primitive world falling prey to the machinations of patriarchal domination. Women living in modern times in cities like Delhi are shown to be as vulnerable to victimization as women like Bilasia living in the jungles with no influence of the outer materialistic world. Gendered portrayal is therefore important in this context as it highlights the inherent biasedness towards the male characters in worlds and texts dominated by them.

Foregrounding the Victimization of the Female Characters in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

The character of Meena Chatterjee in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is portrayed objectively as “quite pretty in a westernized sort of way” (Joshi, 2015, p. 28) and also that she is loquacious and hollow for which she was unable to satisfy Billy's inner urge. Here, the portrayal of a female character in terms of her physical beauty commodifies her utility as an object to be used solely for her husband's wants and needs and to be abandoned as and when those needs are

fulfilled. There is absolutely no mention in the text whether Billy has satisfied her inner desires or not and nor most of the research articles published on Joshi's fiction attempt to question this very fact. Billy's desires are important because he is a male while Meena's desires are not even given secondary importance.

It was Billy's choice to marry Meena but after a year he gets seemingly bored and considers his marriage to be "ill-conceived, ill-fated" (Joshi, 2015, p. 133). His wife is typically portrayed in both the text as well as in popular opinion as a representative of superficiality and hollowness of the modern materialistic society. At the same time, it makes us question how her husband who continues a long-term extra-marital affair with Rima Kaul is portrayed as a saint-like figure. If Meena is considered to lack empathy then surely Billy is also lacking in the same for having an extra-marital affair and eventually leaving her and their only child without even bothering to say goodbye. Despite having a clear understanding of whatever is going on within him, Billy chooses to blame Meena which is typically patriarchal and is evident in his confession to Romi:

And only one chance in a thousand could have saved my marriage. It might have been saved if Meena had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering. These, I am afraid, she did not have. Her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phoney society- all had ensured that she should not have it. So the more I tried to tell her what was corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair so to speak, the more resentful she became. (Joshi, 2015, p. 133)

Billy after abandoning Meena and their child happens to come across Romi who tells him that Meena has opened a boutique after he has disappeared and Billy simply reacts by saying that "I can't imagine Meena doing something that did not make money" (Joshi, 2015, p. 79). The tragedy here is that Meena never gave up hope that Billy would someday return home although she suffered as much as Billy in their disappointment of a marriage, maybe even more so since her wishes and desires were completely sidelined and forgotten. Her loyalty to their marriage can simply be ascertained from the fact that she never remarried in the 10 years after her husband abandoned her and continued to love with his family like any devoted daughter-in-law would. In return, all that she received was a judgement as being a representative of a greedy society only because she opened a boutique to fend for herself and her child after being abandoned by her husband.

His affair with Rima Kaul, a girl who unfortunately falls in love with him, is justified by Billy himself that she possessed that rare empathy in which Meena was lacking which obviously is as ridiculous as it sounds. Rima also eventually becomes one of the reasons of Billy's undoing as the text would have us believe thereby completely ignoring the issue of her victimization. With her, Billy behaves "like any common rogue" (Joshi, 2015, p. 135) taking her to cheap hotels and as expected he gradually gets bored with Rima too and tries to blame the materialistic society for his degradation. Although he keeps on repeating how it is not sensual but soulful satisfaction that he yearns for, his actions seem to suggest just the opposite of it.

Rima's tragic nature can be gauged from Romi's assessment of her in the following words, "What bothered me was that a creature so beautiful should be torn by such sorrow and that I should have no words to console her" (Joshi, 2015, p. 65).

On one of his anthropological expeditions to the Maikala Hills of Madhya Pradesh, Billy meets a tribal girl named Bilasia and her raw beauty stupefies him and his inner restlessness re-emerges which ultimately makes him leave his wife, child as well as his lover Rima and start a new life and family with her. He confides in Romi what he felt about Bilasia in the following words:

'Desire,' he explained, 'was too mild a word for what I felt at that moment. It was closer to madness, the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his God. I don't believe I had ever felt towards any other woman what I felt towards Bilasia that night...It was that passing moment that

rarely comes in a man’s life, when he feels he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life...and yet all the while I could not believe that she was real, even though I could feel the flesh of her waist under my fingers and her supple body clung to mine. (Joshi, 2015, p. 102-103)

It makes us wonder if the writer is actually being sarcastic or playing with the language in making us guess who the perpetrator is and who the victim is. It is apparent now that we should be looking at how Billy deadens Meena by becoming unavailable in his marriage and how it is Billy who corrupts an innocent girl like Rima who was foolish enough to fall in love with a married man by taking advantage of her love. Characters like Rima and Meena therefore serve only to facilitate the male protagonist reach his desired destination in a text that focusses on him only.

Presenting an Alternate Image of Women in *The Foreigner*

In Joshi’s first novel *The Foreigner*, an immigrant Indian named Sindi Oberoi, also like Billy Biswas, searches for meaning and purpose in his life while suffering from detachment and alienation because of which he has commitment issues. Because of his emotional unavailability the character of June suffers as she wanted to get married to him. It is because of his unwillingness and inability to commit to June that her life accelerated towards a tragic end. This novel, however, shows us quite an alternate image of women with, of course double standards. Two female characters Anna and Kathy exhibit character traits similar to Billy Biswas but simply because of their gender, they were not portrayed in a pedestal. The first character, thirty-five-year-old Anna, who has been separated from her husband indulges in a physical relationship with the male protagonist simply to have a sense of “her lost youth” (Joshi, 1968, p. 143). It is interesting how the emphasis here is on the age of the character-thirty-five, creating an impression as if that is not usually an age to be indulging in such proclivities. The second character Kathy leaves Sindi after a brief physical relationship to return to her husband as “she thought marriage was sacred and had to be maintained at all costs” (Joshi, 1968, p. 144).

The stepmother of Karl also maintained illicit relationships with other men openly and she even tried to brim him into the fold after the demise of her husband. This forces him to leave his home and his hatred for her can be gauged from his own words when he says that “I hated the way my stepmother brought lovers home after my father died. And one day when she got drunk and tried to seduce me, I left” (Joshi, 1968, p. 25).

What Anna and Kathy does here is not so different than what Billy does in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*- having physical relations for personal gains- but there is a noticeable difference in the portrayal of the actions of the female characters as compared to the male characters in Joshi’s fiction which almost borders on being judgmental. Whereas Billy is elevated to a pedestal, Anna and Kathy are simply relegated to the background to highlight Sindi Oberoi’s quest for inner peace. The fact that the choices of the female characters are not taken into account can be seen even in a simple instance of Sindi ordering coffee for both himself and June without bothering to ask her as he thought “I ordered coffee for both of us. There was no point in asking what she wanted” (Joshi, 1968, p. 9). At that very moment, Sindi was to have a conversation with her regarding the death of her husband, Babu Khemka, in a car accident and so it should have been a humanitarian gesture on his part to make her as much comfortable as possible. He had simply assumed that upon hearing the death of her husband June may want to have coffee or she may not be able to have anything else other than coffee.

For his own part, Sindi Oberoi suffers from commitment issues due to which he refuses to marry June and marriage in his opinion is, “more of a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars. And then they gobbled each other up” (Joshi, 1968, p. 60). June as a female character suffers twice as both Sindi and Babu Khemka failed to provide her the relationship she actually desired. After being abandoned by Sindi’s detachment

June turns to Babu Khemka and gets married to him but in that marriage, she feels alienated, lonely and dissatisfied, more emotionally than physically as she starts ruminating on the reasons that led her to marry him in the first place, “I had wanted to belong to you but you didn’t want it. You are so self-sufficient there is hardly any place for me in your life- except perhaps as a mistress” (Joshi, 1968, p. 136).

The Foreigner also highlights among other issues the question of women’s virginity as a pre-requisite for marriage in most traditional families. Virtue and virginity are almost always synonymous and interchangeable with each other in the context of traditional values and cultures. This has been so rigidly enforced in traditional families that the issue of virginity has deeply rooted itself in the subconscious of women and they are often subjected to humiliation by raising questions on their virgin status whereas male virginity goes unquestioned and unpunished. This is reflected in Shiela’s comments on June:

“June wouldn’t have been acceptable to us, that is all I know,” Sheila said. And then she added with an air of stubborn finality that left little to be said: “She wasn’t virtuous.”

“How do you know she was not virtuous?”

“All I know is that she was not a virgin. Babu told me himself”. (Joshi, 1968, p. 52)

It is ironical that Shiela’s own brother has affairs with many girls and he himself confesses before her about it that “Of course, I don’t want to marry anyone. I just want to gain experience, you know” (Joshi, 1968, p. 21). This shows how women have been forced to accept that it is okay for men to have multiple sexual relationships simply because women have been subjugated by male domination for so long that now they have stopped questioning or raising their voices in instances like this one.

Women as Objects of Conquest in *The Last Labyrinth*

The Last Labyrinth published in 1981 brought home for Arun Joshi the much coveted Sahitya Academy Award in 1983. On the surface, the novel is a tale told in flashbacks of a rich businessman trying to take over the business of a smaller businessman in a desperate attempt to possess his wife for whom he developed a kind of obsessive love that borders on self-destructive madness. On a deeper level, the novel highlights the existentialist crisis of man in the modern society searching for meaning and purpose to his life and also to reclaim a part of the soul lost in the pursuit of materialist ideals.

From an early age Som Bhaskar, the narrator and protagonist of the novel suffers from spiritual loneliness and despite being married to a “an extraordinary woman” (Joshi, 2015, p. 11) and fathering two children with her, longs for soulful satisfaction in the pursuit of which he indulges in sexual relationships with various women from various strata of society ranging from nurses to librarians to wives of friends. One of them is the character of Leela Sabnis who becomes a victim of the confusion of the male protagonist’s wants,

Leela Sabnis was a muddled creature. As muddled to me. Muddled by her ancestry, by marriage, by divorce, by too many books. When she made love-yes-when she made love, the confusion momentarily lifted. But immediately after, as she stood looking down at me...the confusion descended in one roaring storm. (Joshi, 2015, p. 77-78)

Just like with the Billy-Rima Kaul affair, this brief relationship of Som Bhaskar and Leela Sabnis also ended simply because it failed to provide him with something he was looking for. As typical as it sounds the wants and needs of the male character are given due prominence, once again.

The character of Geeta, wife of Som Bhaskar, suffers an almost similar fate like Meena Chatterjee- to bear with a husband having affairs with other women and being sidelined for their steadfastness and unwavering loyalty to their husbands. Her tragedy can be ascertained by her husband’s own acceptance of the fact that “Ten years with me and she had developed her own guide-book of grief” (Joshi, 2015, p. 56). Som Bhaskar, just like Bimal Biswas, marries Geeta and later realizes that he cannot understand her and eventually made a mess of

his married life like Billy. Geeta’s importance in his life can be understood from his acceptance of his own dependency on her:

I needed the trust- who doesn’t? I needed it all the more because I did not trust myself, or my men, or my fate, or the ceaseless travel on the social wheel. Between the empty home and the cluttered offices- so many men, unknown, unknowable, each with a quiver of axes to grind- between these two poles of existence, friendless in a city I did not love and which, for that matter, did not love me, even though it eyed my money, in this whore of a city needed most was to be reassured that all was well. (Joshi, 2015, p. 57)

Anuradha in the novel is introduced to us as someone who has been witness to “murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world” (Joshi, 2015, p. 190). One of the characters K describes her in the following words, “you know, Som, my life has been spent amidst misery and suffering but I know of no other human being who suffered as much as Anuradha” (Joshi, 2015, p. 189-90).

Anuradha’s character goes through tremendous upheavals in her life and her choices or desires are never brought under consideration and despite her suffering she is once again objectified and offered on a platter to be victimized as can be seen in the following lines from the text:

And Anuradha? Hers was a city without a name, a city set in an oasis, plundered a thousand times and waiting to be plundered again by men like Aftab and me who forever lurked in its desert purlieus. (Joshi, 2015, p. 33)

She becomes less than a human and more like an inanimate treasure to be possessed, a puzzle to be solved simply because she poses as a challenge to the protagonist who cannot understand her, in the same way he is not sure of what he wants.

Results and Discussion

1. The female characters in the three selected texts function only as a means to an end and are martyred for a lost cause. Despite their varied portrayal in the three different texts, the issue of their victimization remains the same. Female characters are made to suffer and occupy secondary and almost peripheral positions in the narrative with no choice or voice. A similar fate binds the female characters of the three texts together, from Meena Chatterjee to Anuradha to June, culture and geography seems to have no effect in their life as they are made to suffer in every setup.
2. The character of Geeta in *The Last Labyrinth* suffers a fate similar to Meena in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*- both their lives are thrown apart by betrayal and indifference. Both turned out to be the quintessential epitome of wife and their eventual suffering leads us to question the reality of the world we are living in where the good are punished and the guilty go free.
3. Foregrounding of the female characters has served to expose the hypocrisies of male character portrayals in the selected texts. Such foregrounding in a way blurs the line between fiction and reality as the latter seems to be no less than the former where the victimization of women is concerned.
4. Compared to *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Last Labyrinth*, the female characters in *The Foreigner* are bolder in attitude and lifestyle and they are shown to take sexual relationships quite casually like the male characters in the other two works of fiction.

Conclusion

Arun Joshi’s works are mostly a voyage within the human soul, an examination of the depths of human consciousness and also a musing over the futility of human existence. At the same

time, one cannot ignore the ramifications of rootlessness and alienation of the male protagonists of Joshi's fiction which can be considered one of the primary reasons for the victimization of the female characters. Most of Joshi's works are replete with existentialist themes and focusing on the ethical choices made by a man in his journey to enlightenment and spiritual salvation. The emphasis here is on the choices made by the male characters and the repercussions they have on their being. The female characters are not usually given that freedom to make choices and the act that they fall victims because of the choices made by their male counterparts is never brought into question. Inside Joshi's fiction, women both in the eastern and western world are shown to be weak and dependent on men and their lives are heavily influenced by the actions of their male counterparts. To conclude, it would be therefore justified to maintain that in the world of the fiction of Arun Joshi there are no corrupt or pure women, instead there are only women who have been victims of gendered portrayals both within the fictional world and in the pages of patriarchal texts.

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Bio-note

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