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GUILT, DESIRE, AND THE DIVIDED SELF: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF ARUN JOSHI'S FICTION

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Abstract
This article offers a psychoanalytical reading of Arun Joshi's The Apprentice (1974) and The Last Labyrinth (1981), two first-person confessional novels whose narrators are divided against themselves. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's account of the conflict between instinct and conscience, his view of guilt as the core problem of civilisation, and Jacques Lacan's thought of desire as an endless pursuit of an object that cannot meet it, the article contends that the two novels dramatise supplementary forms of psychic part. In The Apprentice, Ratan Rathor, the son of an idealistic freedom fighter, abandons his father's values for the security of a government career, accepts a bribe that sends malfunctioning equipment to soldiers at war, and is consumed by a guilt he can neither confess nor expiate until he chooses a humble daily penance. In The Last Labyrinth, Som Bhaskar, a well-off industrialist haunted by the cry "I want," pursues to fill an inner void through possession of companies and women, above all the enigmatic Anuradha, whose sacrifice exposes the limits of his sound, acquisitive self. The article shows that Ratan's divided self is shaped chiefly by guilt and Som's chiefly by unappeasable desire, and that Joshi treats confession as an unfinished but partial and unfinished path toward wholeness.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, The Apprentice, The Last Labyrinth, psychoanalysis, guilt, desire, divided self, Freud, superego, Indian English fiction

Arun Joshi's fiction is a fiction of interiority. His protagonists are accomplished, educated men who tell their own stories in an effort to understand what has gone incorrect inside them. In his third and fourth novels, The Apprentice (1974) and The Last Labyrinth (1981), this confessional form achieves its fullest development. Ratan Rathor, the narrator of The Apprentice, is a government official who recounts his slide from youthful idealism into corruption to a youthful listener. Som Bhaskar, the narrator of The Last Labyrinth, is a Bombay industrialist who reconstructs his obsession with a puzzling woman in Benares. Both men speak from a position of crisis, and both are divided between the person they present to the world and the hidden forces that drive them.

This article reads the two novels through psychoanalytic theory. It argues that each narrator embodies a different form of the divided self. Ratan is a man of guilt, torn between a punishing conscience inherited from his father and a desire for security that leads him to betray it. Som is a man of desire, driven by a craving that no object can meet and haunted by a void that his rational and logical mind can not explain. In both novels, the act of narration itself becomes a kind of speaking cure, an attempt to bring unconscious conflict into language. Yet Joshi furthermore suggests that confession entirely can not heal the divided self; it can just start the work of reintegration.

Sigmund Freud's model of the mind splits the psyche into contending agencies: the i d, the seat of instinctual drives; the ego, which negotiates with outside reality; and the superego, the internalised voice of parental and social authority. Psychic conflict emerges when the demands of the id clash with the prohibitions of the superego. The superego punishes similar transgressions with guilt, which may be intentional or may run unconsciously as anxiety, self-punishment and a need for expiation. In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud went so far as to describe the sense of guilt as "the most critical and vital and vital problem in the development of civilization" (134). Civilisation, in his account, necessitates the renunciation of instinct, and the price of that renunciation is a far-reaching unhappiness.

Jacques Lacan's later revision of Freud changes the focus from instinct to desire. For Lacan, desire is not a need that can be satisfied by a particular object; it is an absence at the centre of the topic, endlessly displaced from one object to another. The theme pursues wealth, status or a beloved in the hope of becoming whole, but each object turns out to be exclusively a substitute for what is missing. Desire is thus structurally unappeasable, and the topic who pursues it most intensely discovers most painfully the void at his own centre. These two frameworks illuminate Joshi's novels

with specific force. The Apprentice is above all a study of guilt and the superego, while The Last Labyrinth is a study of desire and lack. Both novels furthermore draw on Indian traditions of self-knowledge, notably the Bhagavad Gita, which Joshi uses as a counterweight to Western psychology. The divided self in his fiction is thus both a psychoanalytic and a spiritual state.

Ratan Rathor's psychic conflict begins in his family. His father, a lawyer, gave up a lucrative practice to join the freedom struggle and died for his ideals. His mother, left in poverty, insists that without money all idealism is meaningless. In Freudian conditions, the father becomes the source of Ratan's superego, an exalted ideal of patriotism and sacrifice, while the mother voices the practical demands of survival. Ratan absorbs both. He feels that he and his mother "suffer from the correspondence disease: discontent and discontent" (*Apprentice* 25), a phrase that captures the restless dissatisfaction of a self that can not reconcile its two parental voices.

In Delhi, Ratan resolves the conflict by betraying the father. He becomes a clerk in a government part handling with war purchases, acquires to flatter his superiors and rises through the ranks. Joshi presents this process as a gradual surrender of conscience to conformity. Ratan observes how colonial and bureaucratic habits generate a docility "that makes the middle-class so blindly follow its masters" (*Apprentice* 38). His friend the Brigadier, by contrast, sees the world as "a beautiful whore; to be assaulted and taken" (Apprentice 18), a cynical image that Ratan comes to share. The crisis arrives during wartime, when Ratan accepts a bribe from the contractor Himmat Singh to approve malfunctioning equipment. Soldiers at the front pay the price, and the Brigadier, his childhood friend, is disgraced.

Ratan's response is classically neurotic. Rather than confronting his act, he is tormented by fear for his reputation and by fantasies of revenge against those who exposed him. K. D. Verma observes that Ratan's "clear disintegration outcomes from his failure to perceive social sin" (*Apprentice* 79). Guilt operates in him before he can name it; it appears as anxiety, sleeplessness and self-disgust. Himmat Singh, who functions as Ratan's double, forces him to see himself as he is: a sham and a false man. Only through this confrontation does unconscious guilt become intentional remorse.

The novel's concluding stages a form of expiation that is both psychological and spiritual. Each morning Ratan sits on the steps of a temple and wipes the shoes of the worshippers, then persists at the doorway repeating to himself: "Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be respectable. Be of use" (*Apprentice* 206). He insists that he must

act "without vanity and without expectation and additionally without cleverness" (*Apprentice* 208), echoing the Gita's teaching of action without attachment. The ritual is a self-imposed punishment that satisfies the superego, but it is additionally a discipline of humility. Ratan himself recognises its provisional nature: "It is humiliating at times but apprentices need to be situated in their place" (*Apprentice* 208). The divided self has not been healed, but it has begun to submit to a conscience it once betrayed.

If Ratan is specified by guilt, Som Bhaskar is specified by desire. At thirty-five he is a millionaire industrialist with a devoted wife, two children and a thriving plastics business, yet he can not sleep. In the sleepless hours he hears an insistent inner voice: "I want. I want. I want. I want" (*Labyrinth* 11). The cry has no object. Som does not know what he desires; he knows simply that he desires. In Lacanian terms, this is desire in its purest form, a lack that precedes and outlasts every object selected to fill it.

Som attempts to quiet the cry through acquisition. He takes over rival firms, drinks heavily and moves from one woman to another. His lover Leela Sabnis, a scholastic steeped in psychology and philosophy, diagnoses him bluntly as "a neurotic. A compulsive fornicator" (Labyrinth 80). Som himself recognises that his excesses have failed: "my womanizing and boozing had not settled anything" (*Labyrinth* 156). What torments him is not any specific and precise lack but absence itself: "It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me" (*Labyrinth* 47). R. Rajmohan describes him as possessing become "a foreigner to himself, to his soul, and an outsider to the psychic wholeness" (36).

The object onto which Som projects his desire is Anuradha, the companion of the Benares businessman Aftab Rai. Som first meets her while trying to acquire Aftab's company, and the business-related pursuit becomes an erotic one. Anuradha lives in an ancient haveli whose maze-like corridors grow the novel's central image of the unconscious, a labyrinth in which Som repeatedly loses his way. He senses that he necessitates "a thing, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined" (*Labyrinth* 82), the sound world of his scientist father and the devotional world of his mother, who died of what he calls cancer and Krishna. Anuradha seems to embody that union. Yet she refuses to be possessed. "You don't want me," she tells him. "You don't know what you want" (*Labyrinth* 106).

The climax turns Som's desire inside out. When he suffers a near-fatal middle attack, Anuradha vows to give him up if he is allowed to live, and then disappears. Som recovers but can not accept the explanation. His rational ego refuses to believe

in the power of a sacrifice it can not measure, even though, as Anuradha tells him, "You have to sacrifice before you are given" (*Labyrinth* 166). M. R. Chandran and B. Sujatha observe that, unlike the serene Anuradha, Som is "filled with self-consciousness and guilt" (3). The novel ends with Som still in the labyrinth, still asking queries, his desire undiminished and his self still divided.

These two novels disclose two faces of the same psychic section. Ratan's self is split by guilt: an internalised paternal conscience condemns the compromises his ego has made in pursuit of security. Som's self is split by desire: an insatiable lack drives him from object to object while his sensible ego denies the spiritual dimension that might answer it. In Freudian conditions, Ratan suffers from an extra of superego that he has long repressed, while Som suffers from an extra of drive that his reason can not contain.

The narrative form of both novels reflects the psychoanalytic circumstance. Each narrator speaks at length to an indicated listener, circling back over his past, revealing and concealing, testing clarifications and rejecting them. Narration becomes a speaking cure, an effort to bring repressed material into awareness. In *The Apprentice*, the cure partially succeeds. Ratan names his offense, accepts duty and chooses a discipline of humble service. In *The Last Labyrinth*, it fails. Som can describe his desire with exceptional and superior precision, but he can not surrender the sound ego that stands between him and the sacrifice Anuradha denotes. The difference is notable. Joshi proposes that guilt, painful as it is, contains the seed of its own resolution, because it points back to a conscience that can be obeyed. Desire, by contrast, points exclusively forward to a fulfilment that never arrives. Ratan's penance provides a provisional integration, while Som's labyrinth has no exit except the faith he can not accept.

The Apprentice and *The Last Labyrinth* extend Arun Joshi's exploration of the divided self into the region of psychoanalysis. Ratan Rathor and Som Bhaskar are achieved men whose outward achievements conceal deep inner conflict. Ratan is torn between the idealism of his father and the pragmatism of his world, and his betrayal of conscience returns as guilt that single penance can start to address. Som is driven by a desire without object, a void that wealth, sex and reason can not fill, and his encounter with Anuradha exposes the limits of the acquisitive ego. Joshi's accomplishment lies in combining a psychoanalytic understanding of guilt and desire with an Indian search for spiritual wholeness. Neither novel provides a full and comprehensive cure. Ratan remains an apprentice, and Som remains lost in his labyrinth. But by giving these divided selves a voice, Joshi turns confession into a

form of self-knowledge and makes the inner life of the modern Indian specialist a grave theme for fiction.

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