

# THE ROUTE FROM CRIME TO CONFESSION

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ROUTE FROM CRIME TO CONFESSION

Arun Joshi traces the route from crime to confession in his novels, especially in *The Apprentice* (1974). A confessional novel, *The Apprentice* portrays the protagonist, Ratan Rathor as a product and victim of the debauched social values. Though Rathor is determined to keep himself away from crime, he is forced to yield to it. Temptations conquered him, and he surrendered. The route from crime to confession is traced through three periods in Rathor's life: the period of his early life when blatant circumstances moulded him for the crime, the period that made him a criminal and the period that brought out his repentance.

Conscious of the crime he had committed, Rathor unfolded his story to one of the National Cadets towards whom he had an affinity. He disclosed his life story and confessed his crime to this unknown student companion and listener. During this period, Bhaskar who was an officer in the ministry of Defence, introduced himself as 'a servant of the government.' His words proclaimed that he perceived the values of life seriously, and considered honour as the greatest achievement of a human life. Feeling ashamed for having

committed the crime, he admitted later: "I have been a government employee for twenty years. What I meant was that it is difficult to retrieve honour once it is lost" (6). Rathor said that he was encouraged to reveal the secrets of his life to a stranger, because this young cadet resembled his father. As the pangs of intimacy became stronger, Rathor's confessions became more revealing. Fully aware of the consequences of his confession, he mustered courage over the thought that there were greater things in life than justifying one's own unmeditative deeds:

I grew up in the foothills and that was where my father was killed. You look like my father, if I take the liberty of mentioning. Fifty years younger, of course, but grave and clear-eyed. Not a wash-out like me. I imagine you sleep well, without dreams. I embarrass you perhaps but believe me, to sleep is a privilege not given to all. As long as you can sleep, all is well. (7)

The criminal phase exposed the public life of the apprentice with all its pretensions, cowardice and corruption, and the confessional phase revealed the criminal traits in him, his realization and his repentance. At the same time, there are

occasional glimpses into the past innocent and private life of his early days when he was full of childhood innocence and enthusiasm in the company of his Brigadier friend: “What meaning is there in cycling ten miles, towards the setting sun, your hand on another man’s shoulder or swimming across a river before dawn or going to village fairs to look at the girls, or laughing at nothing until tears roll down your cheeks (16).

The cause for the crime could be traced back to Rathor’s double inheritance: the Gandhian revolutionary world of his father on one side, and the worldly sermons of his mother on the other. According to his mother, it was not patriotism but money that brought respect and security. She firmly believed that money made friends and money succeeded where everything else failed. In contrast to this, his father believed in the values of life. For him, self-discipline was the ultimate achievement in life. Rathor was split between the two worlds, a world of heroism and righteousness versus a world of business and materialism. Rathor always tried to compare his life with his father’s and felt ashamed to see the degradation of his life. He realized that he had taken shameful routes that would startle his father if he was alive. His depression is well-announced as he said: “One thing that

they had all said of my father was that there was a man. A very good man. And all my life I had waited for someone to say that to me. None had. And waiting I had descended, come to these desolate streets (135).

Rathor was disillusioned when he learnt that being the son of a freedom fighter was of no use. When his father died, he had left only three things behind: “a starving and cynical widow, her illness and Ratan, living on patriotic fervour but no funds” (19). The greatness of that freedom fighter and all his efforts soon slipped into oblivion. The worthy son of a great father, tight in the stomach, no doubt, but full of hopes, Rathor underwent a humiliating experience while hunting for jobs. He narrowly escaped starvation and death through the generosity of his kind room-mates. Rathor recollected the colourful days of his youth when his father was alive:

I went regularly to college and did better than many. I was in perfect health. If I was occasionally ill, there were people to look after me. I was the fastest sprinter our college had known. I had won an award for poetry, something which athletes seldom did. There was nothing in

the present that explained my disquiet. Indeed, it was not the present that haunted my dark dreams. What clouded my horizon was the future, my friend, the unknown ominous FUTURE. (17)

His experience of being bullied while hunting for jobs, stood as a contrast to this lovely period of time. He could not acquire a job as easily as he had imagined. His embarrassment after each interview is expressed in the following words “... for me the rejection would be an almost unbearable torment. The blood would rise to my cheeks and to my ears and I would not be able to lift my eyes from the ground until well away from the office. It would seem to me that the whole world knew of my shame” (29).

After a heart-throbbing session, he secured a temporary placement in the department of war-purchases as a result of the chance introduction by a stenographer. Rathor was polite, humble and ready to do anything. He was also shrewd and quick to pick up details. So he climbed the ladder of success in no time. As an after-effect of his sudden success he refused to recognize those who once saved him from death and he came to the conclusion that he was somehow different from the ordinary lot: “I was a different cut: educated,

intelligent, cultured, and it was my right that I should rise in life, to levels higher than the others aspired for” (31). Joy Abraham, in his article, “Vision and Technique in *The Apprentice*” rightly comments:

And he does rise through corrupt practices, making a compromise with his ideas, keeping an appearance and by discarding the world of ordinary decency and friendship. He believes that he has the power of a gospel before which the highest will freeze. He turns to be a black sheep in the mutiny of his colleagues who desire an additional allowance for the extra loads of work put on them. He thinks of himself as a dark horse who has yet to show every promise of becoming an officer. (212)

Rathor worked hard to please the officers. Whenever a duty was entrusted with him that he could not finish in the official working-hours, he would work for it day and night instead of leaving it half way. He longed to move up and attain a position, and then retire at fifty-five. He imagined the day when he would leave his horrible room, and live in better rooms, then occupy a house, get married, own a car, and be

included among those who assume a name and fame.

Rathor gained his first promotion through an illegal attempt.

The three clerks in the section, including Rathor were loaded with work and so they decided to ask the authorities for an extra allowance. The oldest one met the officers and put forward his demand. Suddenly Rathor was called in for a confidential meeting with the officers and they influenced him to stand for them. They told him that they were very disappointed to see him with the other two clerks for a demand like that. They said they were shocked to realize that such a potential employee like Rathor could indulge in such a shameful task. They brainwashed him by saying that it was a great sorrow that their best man put them down:

For me, he said, it was a question of career. A CAREER. Those other two were finished. They had reached whatever levels their abilities could take them to. Soon they would be retired. For me, he said, it was different. I was young and showed every promise of becoming an officer. The position for an assistant was soon to be created. Did I or did I not want to be considered for it. Rewards in government service, he said, were not



always made through allowances. There were promotions, too. (38)

In his mad pursuit of career, he ditched the other two clerks but gained the reward for himself from the authorities. He soon became an assistant superintendent and had a dozen clerks working under him. The phase of crime started off with his callous attitude towards his colleagues. For his personal benefits, he threw away their friendship and intimacy. Rathor knew that he was not justified for his action against his colleagues. The incident gave him some sleepless nights during which the argument between right and wrong haunted his mind. To make the situation worse, one day he overheard the two clerks saying that “Rathor is a whore” (47). His mind reverberated with these words, and he was upset. At the same time repercussions of the case made him thick-skinned. Notwithstanding the stumbling block, he got married to a relative of his superintendent. He did not think of the background of his fiancé. The fact that she was his superintendent’s relative made her eligible for marriage. He proclaimed his intention: “I had become a man of ambition. Not the vaporous ambition of adolescence that is soon dissolved but the cold, calculated, ambition of a hardened

man” (49). Though his ambition paved the way for careless crimes, he was haunted by a streak of self-analysis and purification side by side.

Rathor inherited the love of his land from his father. As his mind wobbled with confusion, he found solace by participating in the war. He suddenly became kind-hearted and patriotic and was the first to give a donation. He even tried to communicate to the public by writing letters to the editors of various newspapers expressing his anger at the treachery of the enemy. He donated blood to the Red Cross and insisted on being called again. He brought out a document with quotations from Mahatma Gandhi and the Bhagavat Gita. He attacked all those who were corrupt, devoting several pages to describe all aspects of corruption. He not only tried to encourage the people around him but also played the role model.

Rathor was well aware of the crimes and corruptions that had formed the dark phase of his life. His article “Crisis of Character” reveals this fact: “I wrote, there was no elevation of the spirit. Instead, there was only corruption. Corruption! I had at last hit upon the ugly word. And did I flog it! . . . I attacked them from every side, devoting several

pages to describe all aspects of corruption” (56). One of his colleagues introduced him as Mr. Crisis of Character. He was criticized for his foolish sincerity side by side with hypocrisy. He lacked the moral courage to put into practice what he preached. That ultimately led to his crime and later on, his confession. M. K. Bhatnagar points out in *“The Novels of Arun Joshi: A Critical Study”*: “Ratan is not shown as eagerly pouncing on all tourists to ‘confess’ so that he can have the perverse pleasure of proving that all are guilty, he more than once admits to a pathetic need for an audience to whom he can unburden himself” (13).

A situation arose when he was trapped into becoming the indirect murderer of his Brigadier friend. He accepted a bribe not because of any need for money but because of the confused values of the society in which he lived: “What was right? What was wrong? We liked to believe, was a matter of a little adjustment. (65). In the end his moral decency was completely at stake and he found it difficult to confess in order to save his friend who was more than a brother to him.

Rathor was arrested because of his involvement in the crime and put in the lock-up for a while. His horrible experience in the lock-up made him think of the

meaninglessness of his power, position and money in life. He was taken to the jail to be questioned on the issue of clearing the defective war materials. He sat among pimps, prostitutes, burglars, pick pockets and murderers. The inspector questioned him thoroughly and forced him to tell the truth. But Rathor was determined not to confess. Only after he was released, he thought of confession.

Rathor's visit to the Brigadier's house on New Year's Eve gradually paved the way for his confession. As he entered the house of the Brigadier he saw him sitting on the veranda, gently rocking in his rocking chair. Rathor was taken aback when the Brigadier's wife stopped him as he moved forward to hug his friend. Rathor was advised to observe his friend from an inner room to find out the abnormality in his behaviour. As he rocked, the Brigadier muttered and laughed occasionally. Rathor watched him with a sense of doom, and slowly realized that his friend was on the brink of madness. Rathor described this rare and honest moment of his life as follows: "If ever I had been an honest man, a man deserving to walk upright, it was then. It was the second time in my life that I had felt the pain of another as my own, the first being the time when my father was shot" (100).

When Rathor thought of good and evil, he felt the need for confession. He approached the superintendent to know the ultimate truth, and he told him that the contractor had offered him ten thousand rupees and that he refused it. Rathor asked him what he knew of the incident. Philosophically and frankly, the superintendent replied: "You know, Rathor, he said, nothing but God exists. You can be certain only of him . . . there is no point in looking for truths aside from the truth of God" (42-43). Rathor recollected the various stages of his life and the experiences he had gone through and realized that he was cabined in a world of illusions.

Rathor was worried about his sins and limitations: "To be a slave and not know it is tolerable. To know of one's bondage and yet seek freedom, that is what gets you down, knocks the wind out of you. As I sat in my well and watched I felt choked, oppressed; rebellious but tied up totally in knots" (63). These words reveal the process by which the ultimate truth of life led a man through the routes of crime to the possibility of confession. The contrast between the earlier Rathor, the apprentice, who had been climbing the ladder of success having regard to none, and Rathor, the apprentice who passed through the darkness of his soul, ready

to be at everyone's service, is brought out effectively in the narrative.

Contemplating over the crime he had committed unknowingly, Rathor was depressed: "But let me tell you something that a colleague of mine used to say, 'Life is zero . . . you can take nothing away from a zero,'" he ruminated. (142). Even though he longed to be of use to the people around, he reached a state where he was of no use. The moment he realized that the people above had used him as an instrument for their selfish goals; he lost his belief in the materialistic success of life. He even lost the capacity to be shocked and asked his imaginary listener: "You are shocked? I suppose the young have a right to be shocked. And, in a way, it was shocking (13).

Rathor wanted to kill Himmat Singh to revenge his friend's death, but fortunately he realized the absurdity of the whole thing. He did not want to kill him because it was too primitive a solution: "There are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. All else, thoughts of revenge, of pleasure, of pain, pale before it, are made pointless" (135).

Finally, to restore his mental peace, Rathor decided to turn to serve God, through serving the humanity around. Everyday he beg forgiveness at the doorstep of a temple, of a large host, his father, his mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom he harmed. That was the route he selected for his escape from his crime. Crime as well as confession, was a favourite topic for Arun Joshi who successfully handled it in the novel. He surprised the interviewer when, after receiving the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1993 for *The Last Labyrinth* he said about *The Apprentice*: “This novel still remains my favourite” (“A Winner’s Secrets” 83).

Rathor gave up the pleasures of life in the permissive society and started to live a life of penance. Though his route differed naturally from the routes of the spiritually advanced persons, Rathor achieved the fulfilment of life by being God’s agent in the later stages of his life. At the end of the voyage, after Rathor had indulged in worldly pleasures, he reached the shrine of ‘good hope’ for purification. The death of his Brigadier friend had paved way for such a deviation on his way. This time Joshi’s hero had gone a long way to reach the entrance of a temple. While he sat there,

stricken with confessional grief, he surrendered himself and his accomplishments at the feet of God, a point that proves his self-realization. Rathor's posture in the soil, at the entrance of the temple, reminds the reader of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*.

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil. (6)

The route from crime to confession is clearly seen in *The Foreigner* as well. Here Sindi Oberoi became a passive criminal by being indirectly responsible for June's and Babu's death. His principle of indifference is the cause of his tragedy. It is true that Oberoi was estranged from the society. He used indifference as his defence mechanism to avoid pain and suffering and moral responsibility. Life had appeared



absurd to him because it held no meaning and purpose for him. However, his indifference or detachment was not permanent, but a transitional phase (route) that led to his self-realization, (root) a phase which directed him from crime to confession.

Oberoi began to look upon the world as a heap of crumbled illusions where nothing was real and permanent: "Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanence. Nothing seems to be very important," he told June (107). Subsequently he began to wander aimlessly to find peace and identity and to seek for his roots. He journeyed along the routes of life, and encountered the different aspects of life, but his search led him nowhere because his adventures were not guided by any definite direction or purpose.

Oberoi's lonely search for identification originated from his inner fear or insecurity. His feeling of strangeness and his failure to relate himself meaningfully to the world outside resulted not only in anguish and loneliness but also in a quest for emotional wholeness. In the first phase of his life, his crime began with his relationships with Anna and Cathy, and ended with a confession through a Catholic priest. According to Meenakshi Mukerjee, "Alienation in all cases

necessitates sentimentalization of all objects one has been alienated from” (*Twice Born Fiction*, 84). In the course of a candid conversation with Sheila in Delhi, Oberoi pointed out what bothered him: “There were things I wanted, only I didn’t know how to get them. I wanted the courage to live as I wanted; the courage to live without desire and attachment. I wanted peace and perhaps a capacity to love. I wanted all these. But, above all, I wanted to conquer pain” (120).

When he went to London as part of his search for his roots, he joined London University to study engineering. But he soon became tired of classroom lectures. Unknowingly he was committing the crime of self deception. Even though he attended the classes, his mind was not there. In order to gather first-hand experience about life, he took up an evening job as a dishwasher in a night-club. He did not work to earn money; he only wanted a different kind of experience to sort out his ideas. In this bar Oberoi met Anna, a minor artist and a divorcee. Their relationship led him to indulge in more and more worldly pleasures and further to a stage of crime as he left her.

The experiences with Anna and Kathy created a lasting impression on his life. As he later confessed to June, “That

was the first time I came face to face with pain. Until then, I had heard and read about it, but now it was real, and it seemed to permeate everything, like the smell of death in an epidemic” (144). The pain intensified his restlessness and his quest. That summer, while working in a village library in Scotland, Oberoi became friendly with a Catholic priest. They discussed a lot about religion, God and mysticism, and gradually through a silent confession, he could find out the root of his crime. The simple experiences of life made him aware that he messed up the lives of the people who were related to him. The self- realization paved way for the acceptance of crime and then confession:

You said you wouldn't leave her. But she knew you would. And what was worse, you knew it, too. You leave her and many months later you find her dead drunk in a bar. At last you know what it is to break a heart. But the knowledge leaves you only puzzled. Fear of retaliation from an unknown power grips you. You have generated pain. To create pain, is crime. (69)

If the philosophy, 'to create pain is a crime' is acceptable, then Oberoi can be considered a criminal in all the senses.

He did everything possible to intensify the relationship with June. He forgot himself in the love affair and did not care for anything else in life. But in between he was pulled down by his illusions on detachment and indifference. With all her sincerity June loved him and was ready to marry him any time. The transformation of love in June was clearly visible. First she cared for his sickness but later on her love sought a different tone. When she kissed him he realized that it was different from the kisses she had given to the sick man. He also knew that she wanted to develop a more sincere relationship between them.

June gave all she could to win the heart of Oberoi, keeping in mind all his negative attributes. She even pleaded for his attention and kindness. When he watched her getting attached to Babu he pretended to be indifferent and detached and closed his eyes at their intimacy. He knew very well that a gesture of love from him could bring her back to him. But he tried to perceive life from a different angle and analyzed the situation in a positive way, "But you wanted to be of use and you wanted to feel that you were needed. And since you thought I didn't want you, you chose to be of use to Babu, even though it meant you had to sacrifice yourself" (146).

Oberoi willingly gave up June to Babu even though he was sure that, months of struggle to satisfy Babu's whims and innocence would leave her depleted. He was sure about what June wanted, and he denied her the desire of her soul, and thus caused a lot of pain. Inflicting pain on her was the indirect crime he committed.

The spiritual relationship with the catholic priest inspired him to be of use to others and he stood up as a fortress for the factory workers. His repentance over his crime is reflected in the tone of his confession and he was able to tell Mr. Khemka, "I have sinned and God knows, I have paid heavily for them" (81).

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* also clearly exhibits the theme of crime and confession. The discontent among the westernized Indian youth like Billy Biswas was that they belonged to two cultures. They were intellectual, artistic and sensitive and yet frustrated. Their lack of self-confidence and deep rooted trust in anyone or anything led them to different sort of crimes. The description of the effect of Billy's music on the youth talks about the darkness and the criminal traits that spread over the present youth:

Little packages of sound detonated in the smoke-filled air in quick succession, falling in one rhythm or another, creating patterns of sound that deep down I knew were not merely that, but carried a more fundamental message although what it was I, or Billy for that matter, could not have said. They blazed through out liquor stimulated sensibilities, like little meteors through the astral night, lighting up landscapes, hills, and valleys, gaping chasms of the mind that are otherwise forever shrouded in the black mist of the unconscious. (17)

Crime, corruption, the materialistic outlook, and the tendency to imitate the western world generated in Biswas a true love for the primitive world. He detested the modern society that was devoid of all traditional moral values and beliefs.

Biswas, a misfit in civilized America, soon found himself longing to be back in India. His longing was symbolic of his hatred towards crimes and craving for the deeper values in life. He returned to Delhi, only to understand that reality in Delhi was almost the same as in White America. In fact, the upper crust of the Indian society in Delhi to which he

belonged was as spiritually dead and emotionally empty as the materialistic America. Jasbir Jain, in his article “Foreigners and strangers: Arun Joshi’s Heroes” rightly remarks: “Billy like Sindi, is in search of a human world of emotional fullness - a world of meaningful relatedness” (*The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 54).

Biswas found himself an odd man out in the westernized Delhi society. He was lonely and obsessed with his loneliness: “There was little contact between his world and theirs” (63). His decision to marry Meena was an attempt to settle down in life and get rid of his obsession. Actually this was the first step he took towards committing a crime. Meena, as any other young girl, was shocked to see the rare personality of Biswas. She entered his life with a lot of expectations, but she did not attempt to understand him and know what troubled him inwardly. She acknowledged to Romi that she could not rise up to Biswas’s expectation as a wife. The failure to establish a meaningful contact with his wife and with the society she represented; enhanced Biswas’s inner restlessness and his sense of isolation. He was gradually led to a state of confession when he openly admitted that he was

selfish to risk a girl's life, being aware of the strange areas of his character.

The insensitive and corrupt society with its artificiality and phoniness suffocated Biswas's sensibility and drew him apart. He felt as though he was being "pinned down there, like a dead butterfly" (47). His sense of disgust at the civilized society found expression in outbursts like "Oh! how dreamy, how dreamy, how dreamy!" (47). In the modern society, Biswas was surrounded with crimes and was forced to be a part of the criminal environment. His mind aspired for tranquillity that he could find nowhere in the hustles and bustles of the cities. People were interested in making money and living a life full of luxuries. In contrast to this general flaw, Biswas was in search for the richness of mind. By forsaking the modern social life, he gained the dream of his heart.

As the difference in the society calmed him down, the disparity of Meena's and Bilasia's character also provided a great change in his life. His life with Meena was always quarrelsome, noisy and boisterous. Meanwhile Bilasia offered him a life full of passion, compassion and quietness. Bilasia, was what he struggled to encounter in Meena. But the



process of becoming a primitive was only a means to an end for him. He was concerned with the quest for something beyond simple primitivism. He sought reunion with the divine through a calm phase of confession. Finally he found himself in the midst of foresters where he was content and complacent. His self-justification is explained as follows:

I had gone through a trauma that had only left me suspended in the air. The experience had been severe enough to cut me off from the thirty years of my past, but not strong or coherent enough to provide me the basis of a new one. I was afraid that after all this upheaval I may still not have found the place where I really wanted to be. What helped me more than anything else was Bilasia. Girls like Bilasia are a whole more independent than our own girls. (106)

After undergoing the regenerative process himself, Biswas came out in a new role, that of a healer and a priest who cared for dying children and helped the primitive people with their worldly problems and spiritual troubles. Thus, being a comforter for the primitives, he lived happily a life of penance. He strongly believed that his good deeds in the

present would be in atonement for his past and therefore he rejoiced in the present. But as crimes pay off at the end of life, Biswas was hunted by a group of police officers and shot dead.

The route from Crime to Confession is laid bare in *The Last Labyrinth* too. Bhaskar's obsession with Anuradha was one of love, a love that could not make him free. Egocentric and possessive, he took a route similar to that of Biswas. He abandoned his wife and family for a union with Anuradha. The affair with her led him through different paths during which he encountered the reality of life and death and the mystery of a God in the mountains.

Bhaskar was conscious of his infidelity to his wife, Meena, but the pursuit of Anuradha took hold of him. A woman of obscure origin and age, Anuradha had a life of deep suffering and haunting experiences that affected her physically and mentally. An illegitimate child of an insane mother, Anuradha was molested in her childhood. She had witnessed murders, suicides, and a lot of evil. A woman of crime, she possessed the power to attract people towards her and mesmerize them with her beauty. As a child, she had witnessed the unpleasant sight of her mother selling her body

to strangers in the evening. Her mother did not marry anyone as she believed that she was married to Krishna.

Anuradha's name was Meera then. After her mother was murdered by one of her lovers, her aunt brought her to Bombay, changed her name and sent her to the film-field where she continued to be a victim of insult and loneliness. Anuradha's aunt managed to put her on the screen and probably made a good profit for herself in the bargain. She became successful in the film industry and was known to many men. Aftab saved her from there and she became an integral part of Lal Haveli. She was drawn to Aftab by Gargi, a deaf-mute mystic, with profound compassion and insight, and who acted as his spiritual guide. She was happy for some years, but Aftab lost his eyesight. As Anuradha had witnessed suffering, she naturally had an affinity for crime. In fact, Aftab was not her husband because she was not married to him. She believed that it was better not to marry anyone because it was not possible to marry everyone one loved. The mystery behind her attracted Bhaskar and he hoped that she held the answers to his unanswered questions. He shuttled between Bombay and Benaras with a determination to possess

her. He reached a stage when he realized that he could not live without her.

Bhaskar revelled in the world of Anuradha, Aftab and Gargi, and in that mysterious labyrinth, he could not turn back. The scene of Haveli was entirely different from his own city, Bombay, the city of concrete, commercial transactions and crimes. He was tired of the whims and fancies of Bombay city and the material pursuits of the people. What Bhaskar wanted was not Anuradha or Aftab's shares, but the life beyond materialism and malpractices.

Bhaskar and Anuradha were very different emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Yet he succeeded in possessing her wholly:

I was fated to return to that Haveli over and over. We possessed each other with singular ferocity, neither willing to loosen the clasp. Yet each meeting far from cooling my passions, served only to fuel them. I lived on the nourishment of the shades thrown by her naked body under the chromatic shower. (121-122)

Bhaskar's days were fulfilled only with his meetings with Anuradha. All his efforts to forget her, to remove her out of

his routine, proved ineffectual. He tried to shake her off as a 'dream' but he became conscious of the futility of his quest and his craze for her love (83). Moreover he was dominated by an acute sense of loneliness. As Indira Bhatt and Suja Alexander testify, "Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* differs from his earlier novels as Bhaskar, the protagonist fails to resolve his dilemma. He is committed in his anguish of alienation in his existential problems and in his questing" (*Arun Joshi's Fiction: A Critique* 71).

Bhaskar was not completely void of spiritual strength. He did make an attempt to get rid of his obsession with Anuradha. He spent a few days with his wife Geetha in Europe but unfortunately he could not relieve himself from the thoughts of Anuradha. His affair with her was so strong that he lost his grip on his own life. Bhaskar got fed up of his chaotic mind and soul, and decided to knock at the religious door as part of the confession of his sins. He visited Gargi, a radiant and rosy woman of forty with a charming, generous but enigmatic smile. Being a mystic, and full of compassion, she miraculously cured Aftab's blindness. She communicated her insight only through signs, gestures and writing because she was a deaf-mute. Bhaskar pleaded to her:

“I am fed up of this restlessness so absolutely fed up. Can you help me?” Deeply touched, Gargi wrote on her pad: “God will send someone to help you” (58).

The mysterious disappearance of Anuradha from Lal Haveli gave Bhaskar the shock of his life. All the attempts to retrieve her proved unsuccessful. She had gone to the Krishna temple on the night of ‘Janmashtami’ but had not returned. Even the police, could not find anything except a piece of antique clothing. Bhaskar was left alone to cry, but his tears were the tears of repentance. He thought about an odd incident in the past and Anuradha’s words echoes in his ears to make him realize his mistakes:

“There is a god up there. In those mountains. . . There is a temple there. On a hill lined with lepers. You must come with me . . . God will cure you.”

Cure me of what? A bad heart? Fears?

Disappointments?”

She said she could not explain. I looked into her drunken eyes and, in a way, I understood. Deep inside my heart I knew I was a leper, that I needed a cure. But I refused to yield ground. (126)

Thus, Bhaskar's cry of confession paves the way for his repentance and hopefully his salvation.

The route from crime to confession is also found in *The City and the River*, in which the Grand Master's new rule was adopted by the people. The Grand Master stood for power and the River stood for the poor fishermen and boatmen, and the ordinary people who protested against the rule. The people of the city were betrayed by the Astrologer in the guise of sacrifice and public interest. He told them that the Grand Master and the River were identical: "He and the great river are one" (164).

The city represents a slice of modern society filled with crime and corruption. Spiritualism was supposed to be practised by the people and not the ruler. The citizens met with untold suffering in general:

The Canon was swivelled to drop the next two shells in the centre and the extreme right of the building. In an instant Grandfather's house turned into a heap of burning rubble. . . . The fourth shell neatly blew Shani and his little hut into the river. . . . One shell fell in the middle of the rose garden spewing a fountain of earth and rose

petals. The other fell behind the house destroying the outhouses. The first shell left a crater thirty feet wide. (247)

The introduction of the 'Triple Way' for the development of the city was simply meant for killing the poor, helpless, honest and innocent boatmen. "The Era of Ultimate Greatness" plainly meant the spread of awe and terror in the city. The Minister for Trade made an under head dealing with the Education Advisor to remove the Grand Master from power and to acquire it for himself. This is called "A Deed of National Partnership." The politicians used such ambiguous words when they were with the people. But when they were alone or with those who were their close allies, they spoke in clear, unambiguous terms. When the Astrologer showed his fear of God, the Grand Master told him: "And God - what is God? Does he even exist? He must surely have other things to worry about than intervening in the affairs of this city, where we, in any case, now rule" (219).

The headman who had faith in God asked the Astrologer, "You think an ant is born on this earth without God's will?" (19). Trying to save the people from greater crimes, the Hermit of the mountain believed that the world is



the manifestation of God's power upon the earth. God helps his devotees whenever they are in trouble. But the question of the periodic destruction of men and his civilization was a significant one. Yogeshwara was sure about the possibility of man's freedom from the bondage of crimes. His parting words to the Nameless One proclaim it:

“Yes, the city must purify itself if it is not to dissolve again”.

“Purity itself of what?”

“Of egoism, selfishness, stupidity.”

“But how shall I succeed where the Hermit failed?”

“The question is not of success or failure; the question is of trying. And it is not your success that we are speaking of but the city's. The city must strive once again for purity. But the purity can come only through sacrifice. This perhaps was the meaning of the boatmen's rebellion.” (262-63)

Nature reacted powerfully against the crimes committed by the authorities by sending rain. The city is finally destroyed by continuous rain for seven days and seven nights.

Through this act of purification, the omnipotent pardoned the crimes.

The reader's response to the novels with regard to the theme of crime and confession is varied and, of course, significant. The interested reader of *The Apprentice* sympathizes with Ratan Rathor for his self-punishment and confession. The pathetic plight of Rathor is convincing to the interested reader and when Rathor turns to self-purification, the interested reader is overwhelmed with joy and tends to give him a pat on his back. It is Rathor's capacity to laugh at the past that wins the interested reader's heart. On the other hand the disinterested reader supports Rathor for the firm steps he has taken in his life but, at the same time, criticizes him for bribing his countrymen and cheating his own country more so, because he is the son of a patriot. The disinterested reader does not justify Rathor for his actions that lead to purification of his soul. The end need not justify the means always. The uninterested reader blames Rathor for the shameless act and declares harshly that he does not deserve any sympathy. The uninterested reader goes further ahead to suggest that Rathor could have been more wise and shrewd and tried to find out the truth behind the deal.

The interested reader of *The Foreigner* is pleased with Sindi Oberoi's decision to turn to the religious door after all the troubles and tribulations of life. The disinterested reader is surprised at Oberoi's turning point and wonders whether he would succeed in living a life with the worldly gates completely closed, whereas the uninterested reader does not find any fancy in Oberoi shunning himself from public gaze. Again, an uninterested reader expects a confession from Oberoi, hoping that he should maintain a balance between worldly pleasures and spiritual purification.

Billy Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is admired by the interested reader for his escape to the simplicity of the primitive world. Though the retreat is unbelievable it is ideal. Moreover, the interested reader is pleased with the confessional part of the novel. The disinterested reader may be tempted to suggest to Biswas that it is possible to look back and find out a better means of living than just simply accepting the primitive way of life. The uninterested reader opposes the simplistic living because he knows that, it is not the only way of attaining self-realization.

The interested reader of *The Last Labyrinth* is awestruck by the passionate life of Som Bhaskar and he moves happily

along the rare realms of love and satiety. The disinterested reader observes the eccentric movements of Bhaskar with interest but the thought of his crime and the total outcome of his passion are shocking. The uninterested reader points out his finger at Bhaskar's thoughtless actions and is pleased with the fate meted out to him.

The interested reader of *The City and the River* is glad to witness the city being saved from crime. He considers the rain of seven days and seven nights as a purification of the city. The disinterested reader rejoices at the transition but is not able to digest the Grand Master's monopoly. The uninterested reader finds the final episode a superficial act. He attaches no special significance to nature's absolution of the crime.

**“You have to sacrifice before you are given. You can’t have your cake and eat it too. . . . You want to have faith. But you also want to reserve the right to challenge your own faith when it suits you.”**

**Arun Joshi**