

THE ROUTE FROM INDIFFERENCE TO INVOLVEMENT

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CHAPTER TWO

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Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English

defines “indifference” as “a lack of interest, feeling or reaction towards somebody/something” (def.). The same dictionary defines “involvement” as “the act of giving a lot of time and attention to something you care about” (def. 2). This chapter traces the routes of the heroes of Arun Joshi who move from indifference to the society to involvement in the society. They learn that real detachment is the ability to allow people, places or things the freedom to be themselves. It is giving another person ‘the space’ to be himself or herself. Towards the end of the novels, the characters learn that ‘indifference’ implies detachment from self, and ‘involvement’ signifies ‘attachment to the society at large’. A truly detached person involves himself in the lives of the people around him for their betterment and his own physical and mental well-being.

Joshi brings out the protagonist narrator’s point of view through Sindi Oberoi’s words in his maiden novel, *The Foreigner* (1968): “You had a God; You had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots” (118). These

words go deep into the reader's heart and stir his imagination. Through the character of Oberoi, Joshi presents the plight of the modern man, who is pulled off his roots because of his problems. A pervasive sense of his rootlessness, along with his loneliness, is a threat to him. He lives in a no-man's-land and is incessantly haunted by his past. He has no belief in himself, or in the society around, or on the land he is born. As stated by R. S. Pathak in his article, "Human Predicament and Meaninglessness:" "The work of Arun Joshi, reads like the spiritual Odyssey of the twentieth-century man who has lost his spiritual moorings" (Dhawan 109).

The Foreigner traces the route from indifference to involvement in the life of Oberoi who considered himself a rootless foreigner wherever he went. His indifference originated from the odd circumstances that occurred in his life. He had been seeking the meaning of life while roaming around like a lost soul to gain self-knowledge and self-recognition. His sense of rootlessness was originated from within and got spread all around him. Oberoi's very birth was the cause for his rootlessness. His parentage and early life made him a perfect 'foreigner'- a man who does not belong anywhere. He evaluated his condition thus: ". . . I am a

perfect example of an Indian who pretended to be a foreigner and behaved as one” (130). His father was an Indian, born in Kenya Septic, his mother, British, and he himself was born in Kenya. His birth offered roots in the three countries, and he was therefore perplexed: “ And what country had I represented? Kenya or England or India?” (43). Roots in these three countries made him feel that he did not belong to any country and was therefore rootless. Naturally his attitude towards birth stands as an epitome of his indifference. “Once you are born, you spend the rest of your life, getting away from your birth” (124).

Having lost his parents at the tender age of four in an air-crash near Cairo, Oboeri had an orphaned childhood which generated in him a deep sense of emotional insecurity and blurred his entire attitude to life. Being denied of the happiness of childhood he developed an indifference towards, “those strangers whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs” (12). After his parents’ demise, his only shelter in life became his uncle. Though his uncle was quite affectionate, he could be only an uncle to him, with whom he “rarely exchanged letters” (55). When his uncle moved out into a small house in Nairobi, it gave him the

feeling of having an anchor. But with his uncle's death his sense of security was scattered. He became a rootless alien who existed only because he was not dead. In "The Art and Vision of Arun Joshi" O. P. Bhatnagar aptly declares: "He knows he doesn't belong anywhere but his rootlessness is neither geographic nor cultural. Not even atmospheric, generated by an unhinging of collective emotions from the traditionally accepted values of life and society" (Dhawan 50).

Oberoi admits that he was quite indifferent even as a boy: "I had finished high school but I was very different from other high school boys. I had what passes for maturity" (141). At a very young age, he was tired of living and he had contemplated suicide several times. The homelessness and the loneliness he had suffered during school days added to his rootlessness. There he learnt how to abstain from relationships. He struggled to be one with his peers, but failed to develop a friendship with them. He became an uprooted young man full of despair, detachment and indifference.

Oberoi's indifference became a part of his personality wherever he went. He left Nairobi and decided to try his luck elsewhere. He joined London University with the hope

of finding something meaningful in life. But unfortunately he failed to attain it. He wanted to know the meaning of his life and searched for it everywhere, but for his surprise, all his classrooms didn't tell him a thing about it. Bored with the classroom lectures, he went for a part-time job as a dish washer. His only intention was to get engaged in life and thus escape the monotony of the daily routine. There he became friendly with Anna, a minor artist and divorcee, "who was about thirty-five years old with dark hair and finely chiselled features" (142). His indifference began to dissolve, giving way to the sprouting of a kind of involvement. For the first time in his life, he tasted the sweet bitterness of attachment and involvement. However, at the end of their six-month relationship he realized that their bond was meaningless and purposeless: "I enjoyed making love to her and her sadness attracted me, but engrossed as I was with my own self I couldn't return her love" (143). He also became aware of the fact that he could not love Anna or any one else for that matter. Engrossed in himself he could not love anybody unconditionally be it Anna, Kathy, Judy, Christine or June. Moreover, he escaped from involvement under the pretext of 'detachment'.

As a result, each affair ended in failure. Anna had given him a taste of conquest, and thus inflated his ego. But foolish and petty as he was, he left her the moment he met a married woman named Kathy. After a few weeks of intense sexual experience, Kathy too parted for good as she had to go back to her husband and she believed that, “marriage was sacred and had to be maintained at all costs” (144). These incidents left a scar on his mind and he learnt to practise a kind of indifference and non-involvement. He also revelled in the freedom given by detachment and indifference.

Oberoi’s relationships with these women exposed the pangs of human emotions and the depth of pain that relationships could arouse. As he later revealed to June Blyth: “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 search for the meaning of life. That summer, while working in a village library in Scotland, he met a Catholic Priest with whom he became friendly instantly. They discussed a lot about religion and Oberoi was happy to accept the

mystery of pain. He expressed his feelings in the following lines:

One morning I had gone for a walk. I climbed a hill and sat on a weathered stone. The sun had just risen and the valley seemed strangely ethereal in the clear light. Suddenly, I felt a great lightening, as if someone had lifted a burden from my chest and it all came through in a flash. All love - whether of things, or persons, or oneself - was illusion and all pain sprang from this illusion. Love begot greed and attachment, and it led to possession. (140)

With the revelation that absence of love is not equivalent to hatred and that real love is love without attachment, Oberoi was inspired to live a new life. The magic formula of detachment, he believed, would keep away possible worries in the future. The remainder of his life was an experiment and therefore he tried to be indifferent accepting pleasure and pain, success and failure, loss and gain alike. Unfortunately, his detachment was not the result of a spiritual revelation. It was a mask – the product of indifference, ignorance and egocentricity.

Oberoi succeeded in restraining himself from all sorts of commitments and involvements until he met June Blyth, an American girl, at one of the International Students' Associations. As usual, he sat away from the crowd watching others dance: "It is remarkable how you can be in a crowded room like that and still feel lonely, like you were sitting in your tomb" (22). June's 'large blue-eyes' and her 'sweet little mouth' dragged him out of his loneliness. Tapan Kumar Ghosh's comment on June's character in his book *Arun Joshi's Fiction* makes the situation more credible: "June is a memorable creation of Arun Joshi. She is the first of a group of humane, sympathetic, sacrificial women, who play a key role in the lives of heroes and catalyze their progress towards self-realization. June is aware of the inanity, pretensions and play-acting of the people around her" (48). June was a sensible extrovert who loved to be amongst people, understanding their troubles. A sharp contrast to Oberoi, she noticed a streak of sadness in him at the very first sight. Like an angel from the sky, she swooped down to strip him off his loneliness. She beckoned him to dance with her and each step they took drew them close to each other. June's charm and vitality attracted him and he met in her what he could not be

himself: “. . . she revealed to me all that I was not and couldn't hope to be. May be that's why I later fell in love with her even as I struggled to remain uninvolved” (56).

In the beginning, June was the right companion for Oberoi for she had an extraordinary power to lure others and to cure them of their pains. Her selfless concern for others was highly appreciated by him: “June was one of those rare persons who have a capacity to forget themselves in somebody's trouble. . . . June perhaps was essentially so uncomplicated a person that whenever she saw somebody in pain, she went straight out to pet him, rather than analysing it a million times like the rest of us” (97). This rare degree of empathy and the capacity to forget herself in the misery of others differentiated her from him, and the rest of the characters. Oberoi's indifference melted away and they openly discussed his indifference and loneliness. The affairs he had in the past with Anna and Kathy only infused in him an unbearable pain. But with June he experienced a novel stage of love and affection. She became an inevitable part of his life and he felt her presence even when she was away from him:

I became more fond of June with every passing day. Her thought would come to me while I was studying or putting instruments together or just crossing a road. At night when I went to bed I would find her fragrance on my pillow. Little things belonging to her lay scattered around the house. I would gather them and put them in a closet and a strange tenderness would grow within me. . . . I would fold her blouses and put them in her drawer and I would feel as if I was taking care of a deeply loved child. (74)

Realizing that he was getting involved, and that he could not save himself from being involved in the affair with June, Oberoi says: “. . . here I was pushed once again on the giant wheel, going round and round, waiting for the fall” (75). Though Oberoi was irresistibly drawn towards her like an opium addict, the sense of insecurity and the old fear of involvement, as well as the memory of his experiences with Anna and Kathy stood in the way. Moreover he could not make any commitment or accept the responsibility of love. He was under the impression that he would not be able to pay the price of being loved. Thus he held on to his false image

and deluded himself with the belief that his indifference had attained the spirit of detachment. On the other hand, June was willing to accept Oberoi, an Indian, as her husband negating her real identity and values of life. But unfortunately, the Indian whom June loved was one who doubted the values of marriage and attachment. He believed that in most marriages love ends and hatred takes its place, and that the hand that so lovingly held his hand, would perhaps some day ache to hit him. Debating on the necessity of marriage, Oberoi came to the conclusion: "I said I didn't quite know except that whatever I had seen so far in life seemed to indicate that marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars. And then they gobbled each other up" (60). In short he did not trust the institution of marriage. Afraid of possessing and being possessed by somebody, he abhorred marriage, because marriage means both, possessing and being possessed. His unwillingness to marry June was an indirect way of escaping from the involvement, and the consequent acceptance of responsibilities.

The conflict in Oberoi is noted by Tapan Kumar Ghosh thus: "For days together Oberoi is tossed between detachment

and involvement, renunciation and passion until, in the face of June's maddening love that seems to sweep him away like an avalanche, he can no longer remain unmoved" (50). Oberoi voices his mental turmoil clearly:

When she kissed me, her mouth was warm, almost hot. It was different from the kisses she had given to the sick man; this time I was her lover. "Get up," a voice cried within me. I knew that was the last chance. Five more minutes and I would be involved up to my neck, bound hand and foot. But desire glued me to the bed. The contract had already been made. . . . Desire rose within me like water behind a broken dam. I nearly cried with the burden of my lust. (71)

Once in a café while Oberoi and June were in each other's company, the lady who owned the cafe made a casual comment on Oberoi's indifference. She had seen him, alone and lost, in the past three years and was surprised to see him getting involved with June. Praising him for the positive change in his attitude, she said, "you're getting to be a man now, a real man, An' such a nice looking' kid too." At the same time, she subtly warned June: "Hold on to him now.

Slippery as an eel, that's what he is. One of these girls here once fell in love with him and I said to her, 'Take care honey; you might as well fall in love with a shadow' " (72). This comment was taken seriously by June but she dismissed it by believing that her true involvement with Oberoi would help him to become involved. But his problem was inferiority complex too. He underestimated himself by believing that he had no soft feelings and passions to offer to June. Even love-making was a burden for him. He confessed to himself that at times he made love to her not because he desired her but because he wanted to make sure that she still loved him. The involvement deepened and he became aware that he was getting attached: ". . . whenever she was not with me I felt as if I had lost something. I even began to grow a little jealous when she talked admiringly of some other men" (74).

The arrival of Babu was a turning point in the love-affair of Oberoi and June. If Oberoi's indifference was caused by his rootlessness, Babu's innocence was wrapped in his roots. While Babu was firmly rooted in his tradition and social background, Oberoi was an orphan in terms of roots and human relations. While Oberoi was prematurely old and tired of the burden of his wisdom and loneliness, Babu was naive.

He entered the adult world like an adolescent and made a mess of his life. His ignorance of the independent and impersonal living in America led to his tragedy.

Babu, like the young generation of India, was enthralled by the high-level life in America. He liked the 'dash' of the Americans. Enthusiastically he tells June: "Indians are so underdeveloped as compared to them. Sometimes I wish I had been born in America. Not that I have anything against India, but there is nothing to beat America" (80). This sort of naiveté was an intrinsic part of Babu's character.

Though, he loved western progress and freedom, he was very Indian in several aspects, like his love and admiration for his sister, Sheila, and his dread of his father, Mr. Khemka. Babu tried to solve his problem with the help of Sheila, by writing detailed letters to her and asking for her guidance. Mr. Khemka was a business monarch in India, who was possessive and practical-minded. His love for Babu was not of warmth, but of demands. He considered his son a pawn in his hand and could not accept the idea of Babu marrying June. June confided to Oberoi: "I did not fit in his plans. He wanted Babu to marry a fat Marwari girl, whose dowry might bring him half a dozen more factories" (51). Babu's character was

formed out of these rigid and conventional ideas and so he did not possess a strong will power.

Oberoi and June realized Babu's weakness and advised him to get rid of his father-fixation which turned out to be a terrible hindrance to his growing up, and to his attaining emotional maturity. Oberoi, exasperated by Babu's callousness and excessive dependence on his father, tells him: "It is high time you ceased to be an innocent little rich-father's-boy. . . . Unless you grow up and get him out of your system, this country is going to grind your face right into its grubby trash cans and no one will even notice" (131). June too agreed with Oberoi's thoughts after her bitter experience with Babu: "This father of him seems to be an awful bully. I am sure things would be much simpler if he were not always there in the background, sending those long sermons and telling him what's wrong with him and how he should carry himself" (105). Babu's family background played a crucial role in his tragedy.

The major cause for Babu's death was Oberoi's posing of indifference. When Babu first met June in Oberoi's apartment, Babu was fascinated by her friendliness. Selfish as he was, Babu did not think of others when he wanted something. Oberoi, out of his indifference, could not muster

courage to reveal the fact that he was intimately involved with June. When Oberoi told him that he and June were just friends and that he had no desire to marry her, Babu was relieved. His loneliness and innocence endeared him to June and soon they became friends. From the very beginning, Oberoi tried to pose a kind of detachment: "I did not mind what he did, so long as he did not drag me into it" (77). He could have averted the tragedy by rising to the occasion to assert himself. Though Babu's increasing attachment to June made Oberoi worried, he allowed it to happen in order to protect his own indifference: "It was bound to happen sooner or later. If not Babu, it would have been someone else; it was bound to happen. One simply had to prepare as one prepared for death. In a way, it was like a small death" (90).

Oberoi believed that he was not capable of returning June's love. Yet his ardent love for her was expressed on some rare occasions: "She smiled softly at me and a strange sadness grew in the pit of my belly. My eyes grew misty. I got up and grasped her shoulders. I clung to her with an unusual fierceness and pressed my lips against her neck. 'Oh my darling,' I whispered, 'You don't know how much I love you' " (93). Oberoi could not keep himself detached from the

pleasures of life. He enjoyed being with June and shared everything with her but he did not have the courage to be involved. Oberoi benefited from his relationship with June, mentally, emotionally and even spiritually. Yet he was not willing to yield to her and so he refused to marry her. After his refusal to marry June, she met Babu more often and avoided Oberoi. One day Oberoi telephoned her, requesting her to dine with him. But she declined the invitation: "I am sorry, Sindi. I will not be able to see you anymore, I mean not as I used to. Babu and I are getting married soon" (111). Babu had lured her with a full heart and "a dog-like devotion" (110). The more he got involved with her, the more miserably did he fail in his studies. He was seriously warned by the University authorities, but his failure to cope up with the American system of education was symbolic of his greater failure to cope up with the ways of life in that country. S. Nagarajan comments on English education in his article, "The Decline of English in India" thus: "English education was intended to help the Indians to understand themselves better, to interpret themselves to the West and the West to themselves" (Panicker 167).

The thought of losing June made Oberoi take a new turn. He became jealous, selfish and possessive, the characteristics he had struggled against for years. It was his show of indifference towards their relationship that dragged June to Babu. In his article, "The Dialectics of Enchained Sensibility in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*," K.V.Surendran aptly analyzes the situation: "Shocked by Sindi's indifference and infected with materialistic entropy which renders her incapable of overcoming her aloneness, June in desperation turns to Babu Khemka, son of a rich industrialist from India, who appears to be a contrast to the cold and reserved Sindi" (Dhawan 100).

The prophet of indifference and the saint of detachment painfully watched June getting engaged to Babu. "There was nothing to be done but wait. Wait and wait and let the past determine the future" (101). Had it not been for his indifference, he could have moulded a cherished life with June. According to Oberoi, people who marry are deluded. Their delusions protect them from the lonely meaninglessness of their lives. He thought it was different with him and believed that he had no delusions to bank upon. Moreover he felt that marriage "requires one to take things, seriously,

assume that there is a permanence about things” (107). June openly told him that his ideas of marriage were foolish. “Oh, Come now, Sindi. Surely, everybody who marries is not sitting on a heap of crumbled illusions” (91). Later, Oberoi realized that June’s involvement with Babu was caused only through his own indifference, and he began to rationalize the situation:

And what if June has left me? I would speculate. Was I not supposed to remain detached under the circumstances? But I also knew that the more detached I became, the farther June would move away from me. Then I would go round in circles and start wondering once again whether I was going to lose her completely. . . . Underlying all this was an assumption that June would not leave me, not for Babu anyway. What would she find in Babu that I didn’t have? (102)

Babu’s meetings with June became frequent and their relationship, a fathomless fancy. His entire world revolved around June, and this along with his lack of discipline led to his termination from the university. Babu became irritable, jealous and possessive. He even accused June for sleeping with other men.

On the other hand, Oberoi was not yet willing to see this tragedy as a result of his indifference but he visualized that what had happened, was a logical termination of all that had gone before: "My falling in love with June because she was what I was not; her leaving me for Babu for a dream; because I had lost the capacity to dream; and now, finally, the end of her dream" (139). His new desire to relieve June from Babu, to possess her and to prove that he still held the key to her happiness, was fruitless. But he tried to make it appear a benevolent gesture. He pretended that whatever he did, he did it for June's benefit. His only aim in life was her betterment: "I had come all the way to help her. That was perhaps all I could do for her . . . and when I made love to her it was not in lust or passion but in a belief that I was helping her to find herself. It didn't strike me that she belonged to Babu and there were three -and not two- persons involved" (147). But this gesture of selfless love from Oberoi made June strong and confident. The strict orthodox Hindu morality in Babu's personality had always provoked June. Unable to bear his casual comment on her affair with Oberoi, she lost her temper and vehemently admitted that she had

been sleeping with Oberoi for a year. Mad with anger, Babu slapped June and drove off to his destiny.

Startled at the outcome of his indifference and detachment, he realized that whatever he had done for the good of others, turned out to be a curse in the end: "All along I had acted out of greed, selfishness and vanity and had hurt nobody very much. When I had come close to gaining true detachment and had acted out of goodness, I had driven a man to his death" (148). He felt the need to redefine his concept of detachment. His greatest worry was that, "The gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that" (162).

Oberoi was terribly lonely and lost after the incident and decided to have another voyage, seeking peace of mind, "I didn't know where I would go or what the future held for me, but one thing was certain; my search had to continue" (149). A brief sojourn in America made Oberoi realize that he had become status less, nameless and had lost his identity. He lost the capacity of existentialistic choice and a flip of a coin decided where he was to go. The rootless hero prophesied that his life in India would be a consolation: "I thought of the departure as a process of walking up a ramp and a day later finding myself in an enchanted land where nobody

recognised me and I could start life anew” (150). He wanted to hide himself in a faraway land where he would be able to live as a normal human being, shaking off all the traits of rootlessness, detachment and indifference.

Just before Oberoi’s arrival, he received a horrifying letter from June, saying that she was carrying Babu’s child. On the brink of despair and an impending breakdown she lost whatever courage she had, and decided to seek Oberoi’s help: “It is just that I want to talk to somebody and you are the only one I can trust, and if I may use the word, love . . . I wonder if you are coming to Boston in the near future. I so much want to see you again and talk to you and touch you” (154). He caught the very next flight but to his bad luck, he could not reach the destination before June bade bye to the world for she had failed to survive an unsuccessful abortion. This abrupt and unanticipated news almost paralyzed his mind, and he immersed himself in deep thought on a river bank. There he received the light of revelation, the knowledge that he should be normal like other human beings.

Finally Oberoi realized that he had to relate himself meaningfully to the world outside and apply his hard-earned wisdom to real life. Thereby he would find his true identity.

The experience of Boston had taught him the fallacy of his concept of detachment. The Indian exposure provided him with a new insight to commit himself selflessly to the world. To quote IACLALS Newsletter, No.10, January 1981: "The story of Babu, Sindi and June was a good enough story as stories go. I probably thought that the full meaning of Sindi's experience with June was not clear to him unless his life moved forward. That, of course, led him into the Indian hit" (Dhvanyaloka). The circumstances led Oberoi to a state of mind where he was capable of evaluating his actions and the consequences related to it:

I took a general stock of myself. In many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without its lesson. . . . And the future? In an ultimate sense, I knew, it would be as meaningless as the past. But, in a narrower sense, there would perhaps be useful tasks to be done; perhaps, if I were lucky, even a chance to redeem the past. (185)

The above passage clearly indicates the change that has come over him. Earlier he believed that the past could not be redeemed. Despite his realization regarding the

meaninglessness of the past he found the need to redeem it by useful tasks. He was disillusioned and sad but wise enough to look at life objectively and dispassionately. That was the first step he took seriously to get involved in the troubles of others. With the purpose of doing something meaningful, something to forget himself, Oberoi joined Khemka's business empire. This was a step in the right direction. His preoccupation with himself began to crumble. And for the first time, he came face to face with a reality which he had ignored, being preoccupied with his own suffering, and blinded by his indifference.

To his surprise, Oberoi found the upper class of Indian society very similar to that of America. Mr. Khemka and his social circle had different illusions about life. Oberoi spoke about it: "In truth it had only been a change of theatre from America; the show had remained unchanged. I had met new people with new vanities. They merely had different ways of squeezing happiness out of the mad world. And they suffered differently" (58). Sheila, Babu's sister, was perhaps an exception to this. Sympathetic and humane, she was the only person who understood Oberoi. She keenly looked forward to his visits and a feeling of tenderness grew between them and

they began to like each other. Being a sensible woman, she inquired about her brother's death, and he answered with fear: "It was nothing physical. They could not put me in prison. I feared something much worse - the abominable hands groping and probing into my soul, ripping dry scars open and dipping into old wounds" (44).

Surprisingly, Oberoi started to be a normal being, and his indifference was no longer an indifference to others. The barriers of detachment, which he painstakingly built around his soul, gradually melted away with the onset of humanism and compassion. He was shocked at the abnormal dread by which Khemka and his daughter were held by their employees. The astonishing recognition led him to identify himself with them: "They are my people, I thought" (189).

As he found happiness and peace in himself, he was ready to extend it to the people around. A chance to serve humanity knocked at the door at the right time and he grabbed the opportunity. In the wake of a crisis in Khemka's business empire, Khemka was arrested by the police following an income tax raid in his office. He was accused of swindling the Government and playing fraud with accounts. At first, Oberoi did not want to be dragged into the mess because he

was still a little hesitant to involve himself in the problems of others. He refused to go to the jail taking responsibility of Mr. Khemka's malpractices. His newly-found wisdom whispered to him that one must accept the responsibility of one's action, and that, sooner or later one had to face up to what one really was. He tells Sheila, "Your father is a selfish old man and now the laws of existence are bringing his avarice home to him. Who are you or I to stand in the way? He must suffer if he wants to stop being a jackal and become humane" (182). Mr. Khemka's attempt to thrust his crime on Oberoi became futile. Out of his anger and frenzy, Oberoi questioned him:

But why? It was not my fault. I am not afraid of going to prison but this time it's your turn . . . you cannot get rid of your sins by just turning me out. They will stalk you from every street corner just as they have stalked me. We think we leave our actions behind, but that past is never dead. Time has a way of exacting its toll and the more you try to hold out, the heavier the toll is. (181)

In the end, Oberoi had one consolation, while Khemka kept two books, one for his neighbours and the other for

Government, he could “claim the uniqueness of having just one book” (190). He was faithful in whatever he did and believed that his sincere deeds would bring him further peace and happiness. Oberoi’s visit to Muthu’s one-roomed house in the shabby slum amidst the poverty and the despair of their weary lives, with eleven members of his family, including his tubercular wife, became an eye opener. Muthu, who believed in the law of Karma, never lost his faith in life. He requested Oberoi to take over Khemka’s office. It was an uneducated man who taught Oberoi the distinction between indifference and involvement. He had explained to him that detachment was actually getting involved. Though he spoke quietly, his voice was firm with conviction. This was the culmination of the process of Oberoi’s soul-making. His entire life had been spent to decipher the riddle of existence. And at long last, after a traumatic experience, he learnt that true attachment was not in the withdrawal from the world but in getting involved in it. He became ready to take over the responsibility. Oberoi was specially chosen to handle the responsibility of the business and he got the insight into the right action through a strange sensation:

As I entered the room I had a strange sensation, something I had never before felt in life. I felt as if I had been dropped on a sinking ship and charged with the impossible task of taking it ashore. The men looked up at me unblinking, their expressionless faces reflecting neither love nor skepticism but only the accumulated despair of their weary lives. (189)

He turned to his duty not with a selfish mind but with self-knowledge. He decided to carry the sinking ship ashore, and to achieve his goal of survival. The workers of the factory could not have won this without his help, cooperation and guidance. Naturally he acquired a new strength from within to go through the difficult task ahead. For the first time he decided to rise above himself for the sake of others.

Oberoi saw the meaning of life through Muthu's struggle to survive. Muthu worked hard to provide food and shelter to his own family and the family of his brother. This taught him that the real meaning of life was being friendly, sympathetic, full of compassion and service. He was filled with the desire to serve others and this feeling reduced his loneliness, frustration and indifference. It filled him with a

peace of mind and happiness at heart. The long journey from America to India awakened his peace, within and without. He began to experience a sense of belongingness. With the reorientation of his life, Oberoi even changed his name. Instead of 'Surrinder,' he began to call himself, 'Surender Oberoi.' Indeed, he surrendered his will to the will of 'God' and learned to work for the larger interest of the people. He was happy that he had obeyed the call of his soul. The novel ends with his settling down to life and with a vague suggestion of a new relationship between him and Sheila. They had discovered each other amidst suffering. Sheila said to Oberoi, "I thought you had become too detached to get involved in the mess," and a smile played at the corner of her mouth. "I too smiled," he commented, "amused by the random absurdity of it all" (192). Like a truly service-minded and detached person, he began to see life steadily and as a whole, and smiled at its meaninglessness.

The Foreigner, thus, unfolds the story of Sindi Oberoi, a confused individual withdrawing from life and then returning to it and participating in it. So long as Oberoi was lost in ignorance and conquered by doubt, error and cowardice, he could not see his inner self and consequently, he suffered

from a sense of detachment. Unfulfilled and imperfect, he remained a foreigner to himself, to his soul, as well as to the world. In "The Concept of Humane Technology in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*," Shivani Vasta and Rashmi Gaur point out: "Sindi Oberoi goes on hopping from one country to another because he finds his life meaningless and rootless and thus valueless and purposeless" (Bhatnagar 34). But with the fuller perception of the self and the world, after the death of Babu and June, he was reintegrated. He also achieved a new kind of relatedness to the surroundings. All his earlier delusions were destroyed and he found his identity in the spontaneity of love and selflessness. The withdrawal from the world was only a part of his quest which was followed by a return. If the worth of an individual life depends upon its transformation, then Oberoi's life has been worthy. The transformation in him is marvellous, more so because he was willing to render the same transformation to his fellowmen.

As Oberoi confronted the terrible tragedies that resulted from his principle of 'indifference,' he willingly took up the deviation. The new route directed him to a higher status. From being a man who struggled to find the meaning of a single self, he changed into a useful person, instrumental in

making the lives of a hundred factory workers meaningful and joyful. He, who had been wandering in the wilderness of detachment, finally became attached to the service of the factory personnel. Thus, he utilized his time and energy for the betterment of the poor factory workers, a point that proves that he is in the vicinity of the Divine, working as an agent of the Divine, as the Holy Bible says: "If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest" (Matt 20: 26-27).

The phase of indifference and detachment is also seen in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Joshi's second novel. Billy Biswas mediates between two conflicting forces – an indifference to the modern anglicized Indian upper - class society and an involvement with the naturalistic world. His detachment led to indifference later on. The novel is significant for its insinuation that primitive life is a much healthier alternative to the corrupt and civilized modern society.

The first part of the novel gives glimpses of Biswas's rootlessness which was not due to a negative attitude or error of judgement but due to the loss of traditional values in the upper-class Indian society. Romi met Biswas in New York

while searching for an accommodation. Tuula Lindgren, a Swedish girl, doing an advanced course in psychiatric social work, and Romi were the two persons who understood the indifference in Biswas's personality. Romi says, "What happened to Billy was, perhaps, inevitable" (8). He could not have behaved otherwise. Biswas could not enjoy his work or his work-place. For him, life's atmosphere was oppressive and bleak and he could not see a way out. The people he met were like apes copying the western ways:

I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my very nose, they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning (their large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws. I sometimes wonder whether civilisation is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does the civilised man do? (69)

Biswas was content and peaceful only in the primitive world and his search placed him in the path of involvement, away from indifference.

Joshi's third novel, *The Apprentice* narrates the past memories of its protagonist, Ratan Rathor, thus throwing light on the theme of indifference and involvement. Rathor's indifference is visible throughout his life. His father was a freedom-fighter who had a deep reverence for Mahatma Gandhi and under whose influence he gave up his legal profession. When Rathor's father was shot dead by a British sergeant in the freedom movement, he left his rural habitation in The Shivalik Hills and came to Delhi to establish his roots. With a lot of difficulty he happened to secure a job, as a temporary clerk in the Ministry of Defence. He got married to a homely girl and settled down. Once up the ladder of success, he joined the rat-race. By and by, he became a senior officer. At a point of time he became utterly unscrupulous, much against the reputation of his father. He was completely disappointed when he learnt that his superior officer had double-crossed him in a deal. That moment of despair gave him the feeling of being indifferent to everything he had gained so far - his high-rank job, family, and wealth. After the realization of these facts of life, Rathor makes a pledge:

Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness. Of a large host: my

father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not. (143)

The novelist presents the sense of indifference in Rathor and also his quest to understand the meaning of life. The narrator-protagonist became an apprentice in order to learn the method of retrieving his soul. He realized, though very late, that he had led a very indifferent life:

I was expected to behave. Instead, I had merely walked into a brothel hounded by a strange disturbance. All that I could think of was my money and the fact that I was not enjoying life or what I imagined “enjoying” life meant. The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied and the more, I was determined to “enjoy” life. And all the time I thought of death. (85)

Rathor’s aura of indifference is slipped off by his involvement in religious affairs. The novelist presents Rathor’s desire to love, and his love for life through his fear of death which haunted him day and night. His decision to mend his

life and restore his soul from lust and greed showed his belief in the power above. He became involved in his moral and spiritual reconstruction and learnt “to be of use” as his father used to say “whatever you do touches someone somewhere” (28). Each morning before going to work, he went to the temple but did not enter it. Sitting on the steps of the temple, he wiped the shoes of the people who went inside and then begged forgiveness of all those whom he had harmed. Thus he became indifferent to the worldly routine and got involved in religious activities.

Joshi’s fourth novel, *The Last Labyrinth* portrays indifference and the involvement in the essentials of life, through a series of flashbacks. The narrator hero belonged to the upper strata of society and like the protagonists of Joshi’s earlier novels, his quest for life was to unfold its meaning.

Bhaskar, a successful man, had attained everything in life at a very early age - wealth, education and a wonderful wife. He became a millionaire and inherited an empire in a plastic factory. His education at Harvard taught him the ways of life and after his return to Bombay his aspiration was to annex the failing industries to his dominion. The novelist portrays Bhaskar as a modern anti-hero, embodying chaos and

indifference. Bhaskar suffered from an undefined hunger, a kind of restlessness and a great desire. His watchword was, “I want, I want, I want” (11). Never at peace with himself, he had spent sleepless nights, drinking and taking tranquilizers. Clinging desperately to some person or thing he tried to seek satisfaction in sex, wealth and fame. But he found himself increasingly restless: “I am dislocated. My mind is out of form” (107). Overwhelmed by idleness and loneliness, he was lost in the labyrinth of thoughts. That was the sign of indifference in Bhaskar. Years back inside the caves of Ajanta, he experienced a void:

I continued to stand there until I was cooler. The walls came and went in dizzy waves, the daubs of colour dancing before my eyes. The spasms of darkness grew steadily longer. Or, so it had seemed. Finally, I could not stand it any longer. When the wall disappeared once again I dashed out. (47)

Joshi makes it clear that after Bhaskar’s childhood experience of void, he was haunted by voids both external and internal: “It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and empty spaces, within

and without” (47). The void continued till he met Anuradha in a Delhi hotel at a reception organized by Aftab Rai, her husband. Bhaskar was attracted and fascinated by her, dressed in antiques and living in an antique Haveli in the more antique environment of Benaras.

Because of his ardent involvement in this affair, he became indifferent to the world outside. He could not think of anything other than her and he neglected his business, his family and his health in an effort to win her. He made frequent trips to Benaras with the sole motive of acquiring her for himself. He tried to maintain the thread of attachment with his wife by going on a tour to Europe with her. During his travel he had a glimpse of Anuradha in his dream. Longing for an intense involvement with her, he rushed to the mountain with her to possess her wholly and whole-heartedly. The Divine intervened to show him the presence of God there.

Joshi's last novel *The City and the River* revolves round a city spread along the bank of a river, governed by the Grand Master. Though filled with contempt for the boatmen and disgusted at their ugliness and nakedness, he accepted the fact that without their support he would not be able to continue

his reign. The Grand Master was indifferent towards the boatmen. A dream gave him a hint about becoming a king in the future, and he turned abnormal. He did everything possible to attain his goal. In the dream the boatmen were getting ready to attack him. So he was angry with them and took unlawful steps to demolish their power. But the head of the Boatmen was sure of their strength as well as their role. "It is the boatmen's blood down the ages that has saved the city from annihilation. There is nothing here that the Grand Master need teach us" (21).

The Grand Master, indifferent to the people, did not serve them sincerely. He used public funds and power to cater to the whims and fancies of his family members. He straightened the road called Avenue Gnert River, just because his wife wanted it so: "This Avenue turns and twists too much. Would it not be wonderful to have a road that went straight from the Seven Hills to the very edges of the river?" he instructed the town planner (37). In the attempt to straighten the road many people lost their houses but the Grand Master and his men turned a deaf ear to their cries and pleas. It must be noted that the mighty and the powerful had the right to do anything and their tyranny went

unquestioned. Watching this, nature, the supernatural power, remained uninvolved and detached.

Joshi harps on his favourite question of faith, commitment and identity in his novels, but *The City and the River* it is analyzed from the viewpoint of politics - a theme new to Joshi. Yet the theme of indifference and involvement though hidden, is definitely there. The title, *The City and the River*, symbolizes two opposite forces - one man-made (the city) and the other natural (the river). The novelist unequivocally suggests that this opposition is not permanent and the possibility of reconciliation between the two is always there. It is the city which has not been reconciled with the river, because the city evolves out of the river and not the river from the city. In the earlier stages the supernatural power was indifferent to and detached from the lives of the people. But it became involved when it rained for seven days and seven nights continuously and then put an end to the Grand Master's rude dream and the entire life in the city. Nature's involvement in the lives of its people put an end to the Grand Master's indifferent attitude.

After reading *The Foreigner*, the interested reader is totally silent as he travels through the transitional stages of

Sindi Oberoi's life. The reader's interest helps him to experience the pain of Oberoi's indifference and detachment especially with regard to June. The reader's heart beats as fast as Oberoi's when he sees June dead in the end. And he moves swiftly to the scene with the same pace and momentum to confront Oberoi and comfort him in his dramatic sense of indifference. The disinterested reader, no doubt, sweeps along the ups and downs of Oberoi's life and stands still, trying to winnow the right and wrong in his actions. The impartiality in the reader supports Oberoi to an extent, taking into consideration his rootless past but he is slightly confused at Oberoi's remorseless action of leaving June just for the cause of detachment. The uninterested reader responds in a negative manner criticizing Oberoi for his cruel and inhumane actions. The indifference in the reader makes him ignore Oberoi's past and his resultant character and the consequent actions. The principle of detachment is also outside the purview of the uninterested reader because he has no interest in Oberoi and therefore no feelings for his thought-content.

The interested reader justifies Billy Biswas of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* for detaching himself from the sophisticated world and embracing the solace of the primitive.

The disinterested reader cannot decide whether Biswas has taken the right step, whereas, the uninterested reader resentfully waits at the gateway, criticizing him for his indifference to the successful world and his involvement with the primitive.

Ratan Rathor of *The Apprentice* is appreciated by the interested reader for being detached from the meaningless world of business, waiting at the sacred steps of the temple. The disinterested reader can digest the height of his confession and repentance to an extent but his response is a discreet silence. The uninterested reader opposes this mentality and reacts harshly.

The interested reader of *The Last Labyrinth* understands the cause of Som Bhaskar's detachment and is willing to sympathize with him for his estrangement from his wife, family and business in order to pursue the ravishing beauty, Anuradha. The disinterested reader supports him for his natural inclination, but at the same time, criticizes his unnatural involvement with Anuradha. The uninterested reader is unkind and stands totally against the unscrupulous actions of being indifferent to one's wife for a sheer infatuation.

In *The City and the River* the Omnipotent wins the heart of the interested reader for acting at the right time and showing the people that He still rules the world. The disinterested reader accuses the Grand Master for being so callous, for he finds no reason to protest against the action of nature. The uninterested reader opposes the omnipotent's indifference and the final episode in which nature annihilates an entire city.

Of all Joshi's heroes Oberoi is the most spiritually inclined. If the mark of the spiritually advanced is their awareness of their responsibility towards fellow men, then Oberoi is spiritually advanced. If the purpose of life is to be God's agent, and to spread goodness, then Oberoi is God's agent. He could give up the pleasures of life at a particular stage and search for a route to make his life worthy.

“Some people had faith and some people did not have faith. And both were having trouble because those who had faith were often let down and those who did not have faith got mixed up. Faith was like the angle at which you set your telescope if you wanted to see a star. If you did not know the angle you could not see the star.”

Arun Joshi