



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

Unmasking the *Gurus*: Evaluating Arun Joshi's Bellowian 'Reality Instructors'

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the application of Saul Bellow's concept of *Reality Instructors* to the minor characters within select novels by Arun Joshi. The paper mainly revolves around Arun Joshi's two novels; *The Foreigner* (1968) and *The Apprentice* (1974). Bellow's 'Reality Instructors' are pivotal figures in his narratives who provide protagonist profound insights into the nature of existence, guiding him toward self-awareness and understanding of the world's complexities. By posing challenge to protagonist's preconceived notions, these mentors guide him towards a more authentic understanding of the existence and his own self. The analysis will explore how Joshi's minor characters embody the Reality Instructor archetype of Saul Bellow. Moreover, it will also examine how encounters and interactions with realistic instructors shape the lead characters' perceptions of truth, identity, and his place in the world. The paper will further explore whether these interactions empower the character or create additional burdens and complexities.

Keywords: Reality Instructors, Saul Bellow, Arun Joshi, Identity, Self-awareness

Introduction:

Saul Bellow introduces the phrase “reality instructors” in his acclaimed fictional work, *Herzog* (1964). The word refers to the characters—male or female—who act as friend, philosophers and guides to his protagonists in his fictional universe. Like a good Samaritan, they expand protagonist's consciousness. They assist the protagonist in understanding their society and themselves. They help him in navigating the complexities of life, offering insights, truths, and compromises that soothe the protagonist's tensions. Ralph Berets provides a clear overview of reality teachers' roles in his scholarly article titled as, *Repudiation and Reality Instruction in Saul Bellow's Fiction*:

Most of Saul Bellow's novels employ polarities that structure the dramatic development of each work. The central character becomes conscious of these polarities after he encounters various antagonists who either illustrate one of these dimensions or force the hero to acknowledge them as part of himself. On the one hand, there are the characters who challenge and perhaps even repudiate the definition of self that the hero has formulated. On the other hand, there are the “reality instructors” who may present alternative philosophical perspectives, but ironically their very life style seems to call these options into question. (75)



Such destiny moulders can at times be thoroughly misleading as well according to Saul Bellow. Oftentimes they change the course of hero's life negatively. They shatter everything that is good and positive in protagonists by casting a Machiavellian spell on his existence.

Earl Rovit in his book *Saul Bellow* claims that "Reality Instructor" is "a natural fictional device for Bellow to surround this protagonist with gargantuan, hobbyhorse-riding theoreticians... their grotesque voices swell in volume or fall into inveigling whispers; they harangue, cajole, exhort, excoriate throughout Bellow's fictions" (19). They articulate or embody the stance that aligns with the author's personal viewpoint as well. They are observing eyes of author and listening ears of the protagonist. Ultimately, Saul Bellow implies that in our contemporary absurdist society, individuals are unable to survive authentically without the assistance of fellow human beings. Therefore, the concept of the 'reality instructor' in Saul Bellow's work might be seen as a rational elucidation for this particular characteristic of the nature of human existence. Examples of such Bellowian counsellors include the brilliant pseudo-Socrates, Dr. Tamkin, in the novel *Seize the Day*; King Dahfu and Queen Villanelle in *Henderson the Rain King*; and Sandor Himmelstein and Simkin in *Herzog*.

The major narrative structure of Arun Joshi's fictions from *The Foreigner* to *The City and The River* is preoccupied with central character's struggle to reconcile various polarities. These polarities include; East and West, tradition-modernity, good-bad, creativeness-destruction, faith-doubt, high morality-corruption, hope-despair and light-darkness. Moreover, Joshi's heroes are alienated and are searching for their individual grammar of being. Commonly, they all are surrounded by minor characters who help them to progress forward. They aid in helping the protagonists to understand their existence more clearly. The following analysis will attempt to document the dramatic polarities that appear in Joshi's *The Foreigner* and *The Apprentice*. The research will look at how Joshi's secondary characters are portrayed, with a particular emphasis on how they exemplify Saul Bellow's 'Reality Instructors' archetype. Moreover, it will also examine how the encounters and interactions with minor characters shape the lead characters' perceptions of truth, identity, and his place in the world. The paper will further explore whether these dialogues empower the lead character or create additional burdens and complexities.



Reality Instructor/s in *The Foreigner* by Arun Joshi

In Arun Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner*, Muthu, a seemingly simple character whose role in narrative is limited and powerless, emerges as a pivotal figure in protagonist Sindi Oberoi's journey of self-discovery. He induces a positive and life-saving change in Sindi's life as soon as he comes in contact with him at Mr. Khemka's company. Sindi is a cultural orphan who has been practicing detachment and non-involvement in most inauthentic manner. His dread of involvement and his firm determination to stay away from any kind of involvement, runs as a refrain in the novel. It is Muthu who teaches Sindi the significance of non-attached action, as defined by Shri Krishna in *The Bhagvad Gita* and consequently leads him towards authentic existence.

Krishna in Bhagvad Gita defines a true detached person with settled intelligence as a being "whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and is free from eager desire amid pleasures, he from whom passion, fear, and rage have passed away" (Radhakrishna 123). Sindi lacks all such spiritual qualities. He practices detachment as a coping strategy, thinking it would protect him from emotional vulnerability and his rootlessness. This detachment manifests in his relationships with women; Anna, Kathy, Judy, Christine and June in most inauthentic manner. Sindi spoils these relationships by his fear of possession. Though he lecherously makes sex with them, he withdraws from being possessed in the name of love or marriage. Marriage is "more often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars" (TF 59) and Love more often than not begets, "greed and attachments" (TF 144) according to Sindi, "the prophet of detachment and the champion of procrastination" (Ghosh 55). He gets caught in a love triangle including himself, Babu and June which turns out to be hellish for him. In these relationships, he acts most selfishly under the faulty stance of non-involvement which results in tragic death of Babu and June respectively. The death of Babu and June brings Sindi face to face with "his hypocrisy, cowardice, fear, jealousy and stupidity" and "makes him restless, further rootless and lonely, drifting into meaningless uncertainties about life and existence" (Pandey 51). He himself confesses, "All along I had acted out of lust and greed and selfishness and they had applauded my wisdom" (TF 7). His detached ideology has alienated him ethically and emotionally rather than assimilating him into society.



A strong desire to reconnect with his roots and to get a more profound comprehension of detachment, compelled him to flee from America and go to India. Luckily, Sindi encounters an ideal chance to perform detachment in its most accurate way in India, the land of Krishna. Upon joining Mr. Khemka's company, he discovers that the business is experiencing a significant decline as a result of Mr. Khemka's illicit tax evasion policies. He can easily redeem his past mistakes and sins by taking over the business and by saving the poor labourers from unemployment and consequent starvation. Initially, the formidable barrier of detachment that he has constructed throughout his life hinders his ability to fully engage in this particular scenario as well. However, Muthu motivates him to reorient his existence.

A visit to Muthu's overcrowded home brings the finest moment of self-confrontation in Sindi's life. Unlike Sindi, Muthu remains detached in the real sense of term as defined by Shri Krishna in Bhagwad Gita by performing right and responsible action without escaping from the difficulties of the situation at hand. He is a man of action who is truly involved in the drama of life. He is an epitome of devotional sacrifice who takes care of his not only his family but also his brother's house. Muthu demonstrates a sympathetic understanding of the wants of the other people surrounding him and effectively reacts to them emotionally. This approach is missing in Sindi. When Sindi refuses Muthu's request to uplift Mr. Khemka's crumbling business and save many poor labourers from unemployment, Muthu teaches him the most important lesson of genuine participation in the drama of life. He inspires Sindi by his version of detachment by saying, "It is not involvement, Sir. Sometimes, detachment lies in actually getting involved" (TF 187). This reminds one of a famous sloka from Chapter 3 of Bhagwat Gita, in which Sri Krishna illustrates his philosophy of Karma Yoga:

"Nakarmanamna rambhamanaish karmayama purushoashrute,

Na cho samyasamadeva siddhim samadhi gachhati"

"Not by abstention from work does a man attain freedom from action; nor by mere renunciation does he attain to his perfection" (Radhakrishnan 133). Sindi Oberoi's obstacles in the path of transcendence gets cleared gradually by Muthu's words of wisdom gradually.



Sindi takes over Khemka's business as he feels rejuvenated with this new found self-awareness that Muthu has brought in him. For Mohan Jha, "it is the nature of human distress and suffering, of which Muthu among others, is a living image, that drives him from detachment to involvement, from indifference to participation from neutrality to commitment" (Pandey 54). When he begins working with Sheila and labourers at Khemka's enterprise, he discovers the actual purpose of his existence and importance of true involvement. "Attachment without powers and detachment with responsibility open out for Sindi the path to redemption and rehabilitation" (Jain 14). He even changes his name to 'Surrender' from 'Surinder'. His actual detachment through involvement is on display when, for the sake of the factory workers, he works tirelessly, putting aside his own interests. Like a true *Karma Yogi*, he utters in the phraseology of the Bhagwat Gita, "the fruit of it was really not my concern" (TF 190). "He is filled with the desire to serve others and this feeling reduces the loneliness, frustration and apathy in Sindi and it also creates the deepest feeling of happiness, joy and gladness of heart in him" (Pathania 141). This marks the culmination of the process of Sindi's soul-searching. The answer to the isolated soul comes in the form of Muthu who makes him realize that love means sharing and caring.

Thus, Muthu plays role of a *guru* for Sindi who breaks the cycle of dangling between attachment and detachment of Sindi and he emerges in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* an ideal example of reality instructor as defined by Saul Bellow.

Reality Instructors in *The Apprentice* by Arun Joshi

The Apprentice highlights the Hamletian struggles of Ratan Rathod who is dangling between the polarities of idealism and pragmatism prevalent in post-Independence Indian society. He belongs to a race of men, the Rathors of Rajasthan who had, over thousand years, battled for the honour and made sacrifices for country. His father was a revolutionary freedom fighter who died fighting against Britishers. He led a life following Gandhian values like simplicity, integrity, philanthropic service, and non-violence. Heroic and noble patriotic principles of his valiant pedigree inspire Ratan to make a mark in the world. However, two reality instructors play a vital role in destroying Ratan's lofty ideals. They are Ratan's mother and Ratan's first boss Superintendent. Unlike Muthu, these characters induce life-shattering change in Ratan's life by altering the course of his life. They strip Ratan off any sort of heroism, individualism and moral values. They adhere to a pragmatic philosophy that places utmost importance on money and gives no value to sacrifice, hard labour, honesty. For them career consciousness is more important than ethical consciousness.



Ratan's mother never allows him to follow his husband's ideals. When Ratan announces his decision to join Subhas Chandra Bose's army with readiness "to sacrifice all without the promise of reward or of success" (TA 20), she tries to convince him that it is not patriotism but money that will bring respect and security in life. For her a human being is only worthy if he has money and without money, he "would be little better than a beggar's shoes" (TA 18). She believes that money can make friends and is "law unto itself" (TA 18). The sermons of his mother on advantages of having money makes Ratan helpless and sad. He feels restless as if he has lost all his control of his life to "intricate laws of money" (TA 18). He lacks the courage and confidence of his father to shun the effect of his mother's pragmatic teaching. His feeling of patriotism and sacrifice gradually collapses under the influence of his mother.

His tubercular mother encourages him to look for work in Delhi, which is where he comes to realise that his mother was right. People have forgotten the sacrifices made by freedom fighters like his father. He experiences difficulties finding job in a Delhi where the Gandhian values have been replaced careerism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy and wit. After a series of humiliation with the help of his roommates he secures a job in war purchase government department where he meets Superintendent, his first boss and second reality instructor. Like his mother, Superintendent instils in Ratan a pragmatic approach to progress, emphasizing that success is achieved not through docility but through flattery and cunningness. The Superintendent's guidance extends to social behaviour as well. "Keep your ears open...but never let them know that you know. And don't take to heart what you hear... Above all, don't take things to heart" (TA 46). For Superintendent material gain precedes ethical consideration. For him bribery or graft is not morally wrong. He challenges Ratan's 'purity of means' when he refuses a bribe of ten thousand rupees even if he is in dire need of money. Superintendent's mantra is "Money in the world always changed hands. God was only concerned with what one did with the money" (TA 41).

The mentorship of Superintendent heralds a watershed moment in the life of Ratan who gradually becomes "a career-mongering individual" (Piciucco 52). He modifies himself to the demands of the time and his career. His colleagues start calling him "whore" and "upstart" who at the age of twenty-one is no less than "a hypocrite and a liar" and "a sham" (TA 8). Ratan sheds his past Gandhian ideals and adopts Machiavellian dedication to climb the career ladder. Gradually, the pretending "yes sir, no sir" mechanism of materialistic chase comes naturally to Ratan "like breathing" (TA 32). He even marries Superintendent's niece to keep his boss's favour and to rise to officer's post. Ratan, "a thick-skin and washout" (TA 38) turns too selfish and easy-going that he risks the lives of many patriotic soldiers by taking a huge bribe to clear the



inferior weapons from Himmat Singh. Having made money by foul means, he even immerses in new distractions and “brand-new enjoyment,” shamelessly ogling at women and visiting prostitutes “Openly. Wilfully” (TA 73).

While the Superintendent's guidance propels Ratan's career forward, it makes him a morally conflicted individual. The dilemmas concerning material success and moral integrity nauseates Ratan. A strong sense of being doppelganger takes shape in Ratan and can be seen grappling with a challenge of establishing a genuine sense of self. Similar to Saul Bellow's Joseph in *Dangling Man*, Ratan keeps on dangling between the lower self—self that recollects his father's lofty ideals and checks on his “strange bargains with the world” (TA 48) and higher self—the self that clings to the system of “careers and bourgeois filth” (TA 31). “The juxtaposition of these two contradictory values in the consciousness of the narrator heightens his moral tension and adds a seriousness of purpose to the narrative” (Ghosh 94). He confesses to NCC Cadet that, “all these years, I have been alone, so horribly alone in my anger. in my failures, carrying them in secret, like a thief, close to my heart, until their blazes have turned upon me and turned me to ashes. Believe me, I have seen it happen. I have seen my soul turn to ashes” (TA 70). It accurately mirrors the severe crisis of his self-estrangement and moral downfall.

It is Himmat Singh, his third reality instructor helps him to come out of this dangling condition. The deal of degenerated weapons resulted in the death of his childhood friend Brigadier. To redeem himself from the guilt of his crimes, he decides to kill Himmat Singh who actually clarifies Ratan's doubts and reveals the true nature of his personality. Most importantly, he smoothens his guilt-ridden consciousness by revealing the secret of the deal to Ratan by naming defence Secretary and Minister as masterminds who used him as a tool to execute their crime. Like a psychiatrist, Himmat Singh exposes that rotten part of Ratan's consciousness which he is ashamed of. Himmat triggers Ratan's process of self-discovery by delving into “those psychic depths which would make him struggle against his present indulgence and help him in becoming a ‘heroic’ ego capable of discovering its meaning or the self” (Mishra and Gupta 2). Himmat Singh's questions and observations prompt Ratan to reflect on his past and his father's legacy. He provokes Ratan's self-reflection by taunting, “was it not intriguing . . . that the son of a revolutionary should be doing what I was doing” (TA 77). He is also made to feel the meaninglessness and absurdity of his hedonistic pleasures in Bombay as well. This harsh critique shatters Ratan's self-perception, plunging him into a sorrowful confession that his life “has been a total waste, a great mistake; without purpose, without results” (TA 134).



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Himmat Singh not only destroys the self-complacency and puncture the narcissism of Ratan but also diagnoses the malady to reorient his life now onwards. Singh's suggestions inspire Ratan, by prompting him clarity enabling him to see the essence of existence. For him the crookedness of world and people is beyond repair. It can only be repaired by “revolution perhaps” or “perhaps God Himself” (TA 139). He encourages Ratan to retrieve his “pawned” self by purposeful action because he believes that “souls are like muscles” and to develop them “one has first to put them in use” (TA 139). This philosophy reminds Ratan of his father who used to tell him “Be good, Be decent. Be of use” and “whatever you do touches someone somewhere” (TA 142). At last, Ratan tries to retrieve his lost self through atonement, spiritual humility and penance with a strong belief that, “there might be births without number awaiting us and a ceaseless accumulation of Karmas but does one not get paid as one goes along, right here, in this birth, in this world?” (TA 86). He goes to temple every morning and wipes the shoes of the devotees who have gone into temple. It is suggested at the end that it is only humility that could help any human being to get rid of the crookedness of the self and get rid of his ethical dilemmas.

Conclusion:

Applying Bellow's concept of ‘reality instructors’ provides a new angle to analyse the intricate relationships between main and supporting characters in Joshi's novels. It allows for a more in-depth exploration of how minor characters shape the protagonist’s worldview. He turns to them as *gurus* at one time or another to release excess emotions and unburden haunting thoughts. The different layers of hero’s specific consciousness come out very clearly when he is in dialogue with them. Similar to Bellow’s fiction, these figures come in two main guises. There are characters who either make the protagonist more alienated or there are those who make efforts to end his alienation. They at times, become a foil and at others impart wisdom to the protagonist. Joshi runs his philosophy of life and God through them in his fictions. They are the speakers of the crunch-lines of their author and not only guide the protagonists but also readers in their real-life confusions and dilemmas.



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

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