

Alienation, Identity, and Structure in Arun Joshi's "The Apprentice"

K. D. VERMA

THE INDIVIDUAL'S ALIENATION from his fellow man and himself and his search for identity constitute the thematic centre of Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice* (1974) and his other novels, *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), and *The Last Labyrinth* (1981).¹ Alienation, sociological or psychological, is often the consequence of the loss of identity. Alienation and identity are closely intertwined. Whether one seeks identity with a lover or a culture, the search has social, moral, and spiritual dimensions, which are interrelated, especially in the sense that the focal point in each case is the discovery of the self. Ratan Rathor, the protagonist-narrator in *The Apprentice*, who recounts the story of his life in a somewhat episodic and reflective manner, is initially an idealist like his father but is obliged later to sacrifice his idealism in the face of the harsh, frustrating realities of bourgeois existence. A sham, a crook, a debauch, and a whore, Ratan Rathor ponders the cryptic loss of his idealism, aspiring to the awakening in himself of a perspective which will give meaning to his own existence and his cruel, chaotic world, the classic example of which is the sensual image of the city that, burning in its own nakedness at night, subsumes all and everything. The Brigadier considers the world "a beautiful whore — to be assaulted and taken" (18). Himmat Singh, the double of Ratan Rathor, provides another contextual meaning of the metaphor of whore by poignantly and ironically revealing that his mother was a maddening whore. In this basically flawed and perverted culture, everyone is whoring knowingly or unknowingly: both the antagonist and the protagonist are maliciously engaged in whoring, and during this mechanical process they rob each other violently and inexorably of humanity and of

the spirit that distinguishes man from beast. Ratan Rathor finally searches for the meaning of all this; he strives to find himself and to establish an equilibrium that balances man with himself and his fellow man in a communal fellowship.

It is in the India of the 1940s that Ratan Rathor first finds himself confronting two worlds: the world of the father, one of idealism, patriotism, and social and moral concern, and the crippled world of bourgeois filth, one of ravenous and money-hungry gods. Ironically, Ratan Rathor's mother is a staunch realist who, knowing fully the practical value of money, states categorically that without money life and all its idealism are totally meaningless. Rathor's mother warned her husband not to give up his lucrative law practice for the sake of the false idealism of the Mahatma. Following her husband's sacrificial death, she is more convinced about the value of money. Himmat Singh's mother who, like most other helpless and destitute women, was driven to prostitution by society practically shared the same view. No doubt poverty is a fertile soil for breeding crime, but it is the rich and the bourgeoisie of the pre-independence and the post-independence periods who will do anything to gratify their indulgent lust for money. Joshi's astute analysis of the crumbling values of the bourgeoisie and of the complete absence of ethical concerns on the part of the aristocracy reveals the nature of the moral and psychological conflict that people like Ratan Rathor face, especially in preserving their own idealism. In fact, one sees clearly that the structure of bourgeois values is as embarrassingly contrived and fake as is its prodigy Ratan Rathor: Himmat Singh calls him a "sham," "a bogus man." It is this structure that indubitably divests people of any sort of heroism, determination, and the will to aspire to excellence.

The self-destructive confusion and moral ambivalence of Ratan Rathor, which finally make him succumb to the mounting temptation of accepting tainted money and to sacrifice his patriotism and honour, result from the spineless structure of bourgeois morality. By accepting the bribe from Himmat Singh, he has risked the lives of thousands of patriotic soldiers who now will be fighting the enemy with inferior weapons. Ironically, when it comes to rationalization — one of the last resorts of a criminal like our hero — Ratan Rathor is frantically obsessed more by his honour than by

the severity and magnitude of his crime. But he is not alone, for the plot of selling inferior arms to the army is cleverly and meticulously masterminded by none other than the Secretary and the Minister. What happened to the patriotic and nationalistic idealism for which his father died? He is overwhelmed by the deceitfulness and wickedness of this illusory world, the world of appearance that envelops reality. The phenomenal universe with all its glittering nets and entrapments is like the world of the devouring mother archetype who ultimately eats her own children. This world is the body of history, the sum total of social energy and its representative modes and structures, the city and the cultural and social forces.

In any ideal conception of a culture and its representative social orders, whether sociopolitical or theological, man is supposed to be in harmony with nature; he seeks human fellowship to create a community of beings; and he endeavours to develop his individuality by seeking utmost perfection, so that he can comprehend the individuality of others. But in a modern cultural context which essentially derives its meaning and power from commerce, materialism, and luxury, man and the city happen to be the two warring adversaries that in the social and historical process dehumanize each other and are finally themselves dehumanized. In *Culture and Anarchy*,² Matthew Arnold defines anarchy more or less as a mental condition in which man accepts and perpetuates imperfection, mediocrity, and grossness and in doing so loses his moral freedom. The greatest threat to cultural progress, as Arnold would have us believe, stems from the barbarians and the philistines, not from the populace. The uncouth, dehydrated mental structure of the philistines is evidently symptomatic of the decline and fall of culture. Philistines like Ratan Rathor, Himmat Singh, the Secretary, and the Minister share responsibility for the retrogradation of culture and, hence, for such repugnant conditions as boredom, stagnation, and vulgarity. It is, indeed, ironic that whereas Ratan Rathor can be redeemed, the retrievability of society remains morally ambiguous. In the theological conception of the city, whether Christian or Hindu, the vision of the city of God holds a promise of human perfection, but the view of historical decay of a culture is much more seriously self-deprecating and self-admonishing. While the mythic view of fallen humanity is one of

hope and redemption, the issue of cultural decline and the painful predicament of putrid human waste raise the larger issue of the origin of evil.

Whether we take the Hobbesian or the Rousseauistic view, the problem of evil in man and society is a potent one, especially when we examine the nature of the ameliorative and redemptive forces and processes. London, Mumbai, New York, and Delhi are modern cities but, like elegant and seductive whores, they rob such persons as Ratan Rathor of their individuality, conscience, and imagination. In return, individuals like Ratan Rathor are equally engaged in the business of whoring — of forcefully disengaging the centrality and fulcrum of communal values and ideals, and of satiating their unquenchable desires for that which is an outright prevarication. Whoring implies both the gratification of lust as well as the commercial bargaining of means, but in either case pleasure and sex are commercial commodities to be carefully and schematically bartered. Psychologically, gratification of lust involves jealous possessiveness, abusive violence, and corrosive perversion of emotion. In a sense, it is both masochistic and sadistic. The woman as a whore is the object-world, the “other,” the “de-sexualized”⁸ female body, for such a perception of woman carefully excludes the creative function of love as sexuality and eroticism. Likewise, the city as a whore is the object-world that worships only malevolent gods. No doubt whoring is morally offensive and spiritually degenerative, but it explicitly means that both man and society have been deprived of the central soul-force and the moral vision of good and perfection. While society traps and seduces the individual, the individual takes advantage of society in much the same manner: society induces man to move in a certain direction and man in return forces himself upon society.

Ratan Rathor has seen two pictures of India: the colonial India that produced a nation of clerks, the pillars of Raj, and the post-independence India, which, in spite of fervent patriotism, ancient heritage, and Gandhian moral zeal, is still overwhelmed by the British colonial tradition. The unique class of clerks is ironically portrayed by Joshi as a class of emaciated men whose ambition does not extend beyond the constricting goals of clerkship, career-hunting, matrimonial game-planning, and other highly charged

ritualistic games involving status and money. Hegel's view of history as a progressive synthesis of the dialectical forces is, indeed, optimistic, but it seems to preclude the stagnant and frozen condition of the bourgeoisie. Surprisingly enough, even the Marxist thesis of class struggle as a basis of revolutionary reform and progress does not extend much reassurance to the sociology and psychology of the bourgeoisie.⁴ For one thing, the nature of the bourgeois discontent, if discontent be the seed of progress, is as embarrassingly repugnant and self-deprecating as is the nature of their aspiration or the absence of any aspiration at all. And, indeed, colonialism as a formidable and repressive force has been instrumental in restructuring the sociology and psychology of Ratan Rathor and his kind.

In a bourgeois structure, the dehumanization of man, both as a target and a social process, is not too difficult to imagine: the process inevitably engenders moral decrepitude, unfelicitous vulgarity, and unwholesome vitriolism. It is a diseased civilization in which Ratan Rathor and his mother "suffer from the same disease: discontent and discontent" (25). This discontent stems from man's incapacity to fight against the precipitous forces of social determinism, the Hobbesian leviathan. Unless man responds to this monstrous social cannibalism heroically and resolutely to regain his moral freedom lost in the sociohistorical process of dehumanization, the disastrous consequences is the loss of faith, hope, and humanity. The bourgeois social apparatus persistently emphasizes docility and obedience as values; and it is this pungent and castrated spirit of docility and obedience, whether enforced by the colonial masters or championed by the dogmatic tradition "that makes the middle-class so blindly follow its masters" (38). Once man surrenders his own freedom to the obdurate collective will, subjecting himself to demoralization, dehumanization, and defeatism, he automatically becomes a part of the tyrannizing social structure and its value system that approves marriage as a quick fix and a negotiable entity, engenders moral indifference to social evil, promotes career-consciousness at the cost of moral consciousness, and expects an uncompromising obedience to its own constricted standards of social progress. Surely, both Marx and Freud talk about discontent as symptomatic of the sickness of modern

civilization: in the Marxist thesis, discontent, like the Fall, is considered to be a fortunate phenomenon because it will bring about a revolution, a beneficial change that will replace the existing order. But in the Freudian context, the nature of discontent is psychological, inner rather than outer. Ratan Rathor, it should be noted, is not a revolutionary; since the seed of discontent is much more of psychological and moral — indeed, existential — nature, it will not fructify into a social revolt. As a bourgeois, he is a microcosm of the social order he represents.⁵ But he lacks the will to rebel and transgress; inasmuch as he lacks the will to rebel against the bourgeois structure of values, that has crippled his moral idealism, he still remains a part of this stubborn structure and at times he seems to be speaking as a “[b]ourgeois speaks to bourgeois.”⁶

The paradox is that in proposing a moral rectitude to the ironic predicament of Ratan Rathor, Joshi chooses to go to the very root of the problem of “bourgeois filth.” By projecting into the interior consciousness of Ratan Rathor and by making the conflict finally centre on moral sense, Joshi carefully avoids the possible loss of the hero to the leviathan of social determinism. One might argue that the course Joshi outlines for Ratan Rathor is more akin to the Hegelian idealism than to the Marxist view of man and society. Alienation, according to Hegel, results from the experience of the object-world as alien or “the other,” for the external world is deemed a projection of consciousness. Thus, in Hegel’s epistemology consciousness, by relating itself to the “objectified, alienated otherness” (Avineri 97), the object-world perceived as being out there, recognizes only itself. But since consciousness perceives only the appearance of the object, it must keep on perceiving layers of its own manifestation. Whereas in Hegel consciousness is the basis of realizing identity, in Marx the emphasis is placed on the recognition of autonomous existence of the object-world, on the objectification of the reality of the material world in such specific and concrete forms as property, things, and value. Consciousness in man, according to Marx, should emerge from economics — property, value, and things — and from collectivity and its supposed ideal structure. We have seen that Ratan Rathor in identifying himself with materialistic calculus of money becomes the author

of a painful tragedy, experiencing privation, misery, and suffering that he had not seen before.

It is clear from the narrative that in a society economically and morally corrupt, no structure, including the Marxist structure, can guarantee individual freedom — man's deliverance from evil and his achievement of unity. "If alienation is the splintering of human nature into a number of misbegotten parts," wonders Ollman about Marx's conception of alienation, "we would expect communism to be presented as a kind of unification" (135). The philosophical assumption is that in order to overcome various forms of estrangements man must return from the three "misbegotten parts" — property, industry, and religion — back to the social order. Ratan Rathor has already stayed away from religion; his attempted identification with money has given him a rude awakening; and the social order to which he is supposed to return is merely a degenerated shell. In fact, Ratan Rathor and the social order have been at odds, although, finally, he becomes conscious of the "otherness": his consciousness begins to perceive the object-world as its integral part. Ratan Rathor, it should be emphasized, is seeking moral freedom — the recovery of his consciousness and identity; whereas this search is incompatible with the Marxist thesis, it is only partially compatible with the Hegelian conception. Ratan Rathor the bourgeois, the victim of the system, can be redeemed, and yet the puzzling paradox is that the decadent bourgeois social order itself cannot be revolutionized all at once. Ratan Rathor recognizes this paradox of individual redemption without the redemption of collectivity and the possible limits of the projected social change.

Since the bourgeoisie is not faced with any significant and serious challenges of a Romantic hero, and since it has no limits to transgress, it suffers from boredom, stagnation, alienation, anxiety, and fear. For Ratan Rathor, the question of identity is imperceptible and hence, irrelevant, for either the goals are identified much too readily or these are virtually non-existent. The slow and sly process of history, the monstrosity of the city and the mechanistic and self-indulgent fatalism of the bourgeois have stripped Ratan Rathor of a vision, power, and commitment. The rise to the clerkship and then to the superintendency is not the problem, nor does

the acquisition of wealth, status, and marriage mean anything but a trivial social routine. The resultant impact of all this is that life, based upon habit and conformity rather than on imagination, initiative, and creativity, has become frightfully mechanical and ritualistic. Ratan Rathor's habitual handling of his position is as mechanistic and superficial as his marriage. Even the sexual act with his wife is nothing more than a mechanical and artless coition and is often confused with love. Ratan Rathor can accept a bribe because it is customary for people in his position to seek graft. And once he has become rich, he does not see much problem with debauchery, drinking, and prostitution as possible cures for his loneliness and boredom. The upstarts and the bourgeois, it appears, can imitate blindly and habitually, strike compromises and enter into convenient wheeling-dealing propositions without any moral considerations. Evidently, these unwholesome tendencies of a bourgeois like Ratan Rathor reveal the psychopathological structure of his personality: in a sense, he is amoral and asocial, the result of his emotional and mental disorientation.

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that the modern bourgeois culture of the industrialized era subscribes to the morality of convenience and compromise. Even religion, including the tutelary knowledge of *Gita* and other scriptures, is a meaningless ritual. For Ratan Rathor bribery or graft is not morally wrong, but the unexpected accusation of bribery and fraud has threatened his honour, that prized possession of the status-conscious bourgeois, for which he is now determined to take revenge from Himmat Singh and then from the Secretary. That the nation was defeated because of the conspiracy of supplying defective weapons to the army, and that the Brigadier, his childhood friend, stands accused of voluntary desertion stir not moral conscience but the muddled notion of the likely loss of a name. After all, he has taken a bribe only once and should therefore be judged not as guilty as his other colleagues who have been routinely and habitually accepting bribes. It is as much a question of deconstructing the existing pattern of morality as it is of recognizing the absence of an ethical and spiritual basis of an evolving culture. The search for identity entails living not by presumptuous ignorance, impudent wickedness, and wilful deceitfulness but by the unstinted and implacable freedom

from the bondage of illusion. That he may register legal confession simply to save the life of his friend, the Brigadier, as the police would want him to do, that he would vindicate his honour by killing Himmat Singh and the Secretary, and that he can hide the matter of bribery from his wife as a convenience are some of the non-truths and half-truths. But the intriguing part of all that anxiety and frustration he experiences during the course of his schematic plan of living by deceiving, concealing, and fabricating is that he does not recognize his crime.

Ratan Rathor is guilty of accepting a bribe that Dante would characterize as compound fraud, the sin against community. He persistently fails to regard his crime as sin, although he now reaches a point where he finds it impossible to withstand the pressure from the police to confess. Like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Ratan Rathor has consistently denied his knowledge of the crime.⁷ Ratan Rathor's apparent disintegration results from his failure to perceive social sin; it is a part of the psychological process of his spiritual recovery. But there is a good deal of uncertainty in the epistemological process. Dostoevsky, as Philip Rahv maintains, uses "the principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy in the presentation of character," of "hyperbolic suspense" that "originates in Dostoevsky's acute awareness (self-awareness at bottom) of the problematical nature of the modern personality and its tortuous efforts to stem the disintegration threatening it" (542). Joshi's treatment of Ratan Rathor reflects that indeterminacy or "hyperbolic suspense" which dramatizes the complexity of modern man's psychic structure — the loss of his social and political faith, the degeneration of his moral consciousness, and the fragmentation of his vision of identity. Ratan Rathor himself cannot perceive the process and structure of evil, nor can he comprehend the forces, both inner and outer, that have led to his disintegration. However, the suspenseful indeterminacy in either case is real, especially as it pertains to the dismantled personality of Ratan Rathor and the degenerated social order. The indeterminacy in Ratan Rathor's case serves as an ironic tool of revealing the fundamental nature of the incompatibility that persists between the dream of human progress and the stubborn social order that has not allowed for that progress. The system, it appears, will not prevent the process

of disintegration, nor will it restore human dignity. We may no doubt condemn the social and cultural milieu that produces men like Ratan Rathor, Himmat Singh, the Secretary, and the Minister, but it remains that people cumulatively define the character of society. Ironically, Ratan Rathor cannot conceptualize the nature of social evil; his inability to define the forces that brought about his collapse is merely symptomatic of the insufficiency of our knowledge of human nature and, hence, of our helplessness and inability in general to define that which otherwise remains dark, inscrutable, and indefinable.

By making Ratan Rathor confront the forces that have disintegrated his personality, Joshi employs the epistemology and metaphysics of social evil. Joshi's methodology includes, among other things, existential confrontation, individuation, and re-integration. It is Himmat Singh who indomitably challenges Ratan Rathor to cast off his fear and cowardice and to face the situation courageously and boldly. Himmat Singh knows well that Ratan Rathor cannot pull the trigger on him and that he cannot dodge the authorities any longer. He overcomes anxiety and fear by going through several stages, finally recognizing the nature and degree of evil in which he was an active participant all along. For a while he reflected upon the meaninglessness and absurdity of human existence, its disgusting hollowness and treacherous emptiness. But with the gradual recognition of his own self, he comes to recognize the source of human baseness and depravity. He was lonely because he was entrapped by the illusory world of appearance and because he hitherto denied himself the opportunity to know his real self. Both Himmat Singh and Ratan Rathor pawned their souls; they made their shadowy choices self-righteously and without knowing the meaning of good and evil. Ratan Rathor was a timid conformist in every respect, and lacked the will and courage to reject habit and tradition, the boring and ugly commerce of life, and to confront reality — the recognition that his life of twenty years has been a total loss, and that between good and evil he himself opted for evil not knowing the meaning of the imprudent choice he made. Finally, now, there arise stern and agonizing reverberations of the inner voice, all reminiscent of a heavier guilt and enlightened remorse; he pawned his soul in the dazzling game of "bourgeois

filth" and fraudulent crookedness; he was a sham, and his life was without purpose. But he now realizes that his soul is only pawned and not killed, and that life is not "a zero" (205). The word "honour" has a new and more comprehensive meaning: it means a recovery of an authentic and sincere consciousness — the casting off of self-centred seclusion and conceit and the reawakening of the spirit of self-redemptive social good.

It is strange that Joshi saves Ratan Rathor from committing suicide. The fact that Ratan Rathor does not have to opt for death as being the only freedom from dejection, anxiety, and failure, a course clairvoyantly echoed by a modern school of existential philosophy, not only strengthens his fractured sense of identity but also gives an immediate sense of form to the digressional narrative. Ratan Rathor is guilty of incivism, but he does not suffer from permanent malignity and ill will; he has shown capricious gullibility to vice, even in its inchoate state, but he has also exhibited a remarkable sense of recovery; he can impute crime to Himmat Singh, but the ascribability of crime and the open expression of impudicity are essential to the cognitive process. Following the belaboured and slow recognition of his guilt, Ratan Rathor's method of expiating the guilt, it should be noted, is more Gandhian than Vedantic:

Each morning, before I go to work, I come here. I sit on the steps of the temple and while they pray I wipe the shoes of the congregation. Then, when they are gone, I stand in the doorway. I never enter the temple. I am not concerned with what goes on in there. I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. 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. After this I get into my car and go to office. And during the day whenever I find myself getting to be clever, lazy, vain, indifferent, I put up my hands to my face and there is the smell of a hundred feet that must at that moment be toiling somewhere and I am put in my place. (206)

It is only in the context of the philosophical disquisition of the *Gita*, more appropriately the Gandhianized *Gita*, that one would

understand the asseveration: "Without vanity and without expectation and also without cleverness" (208). This voluntary injunction categorically purports that the individual should pursue the path of action without expecting any reward (*Nishkam Karma*), overcome indulgent desire, and annihilate his ego voluntarily and unreservedly. Ratan Rathor is apprenticed to the challenging task of moral reconstruction of himself: "If you can learn to wipe shoes well, who knows," as Rathor comments with unquestionable sincerity and insightful clarity, "you can perhaps learn other things. It is humiliating at times but apprentices need to be put in their place" (208). Ironically, this penitential process of seeking moral and spiritual identity goes on outside not inside the temple, the inside having become "[f]rozen, petrified, like our civilization itself" (208). Admittedly, Ratan Rathor is facing an uphill task; actually, it is twofold: one of ensuring his own recovery and progress, and the other of using his wisdom to redeem the "petrified" civilization. And yet there persists still another danger of the absence of a clear guarantee that during the course of future ameliorative endeavours and of a possible social interaction with the slumbering mass, he, the bourgeois, may not slip down on the declivitous path and lose his identity. Does Ratan Rathor know that there are cycles and spirals of growth? Or, should he worry only about the present? Surely, Ratan Rathor knows that whereas social identity is vulnerable to moral hurricanes, only spiritual identity will endure.

The task of moral recovery and reconstruction presupposes a battle against human depravity, "The crookedness of the world; the crookedness of oneself" (205-06). Whereas the nature of evil is essentially social, the battle for eradication of evil must begin from within the individual. In the case of Ratan Rathor, the psychology and epistemology of evil show that, in the cognizance of evil and in his attempt to achieve perfection, political programmes and religious doctrines do not play any significant part:

How to get rid of it [crookedness]? Revolution or God? the Sheikh had said. But what do I know of either of them, my friend? Of Revolution; or of God? I know nothing. That is the long and the short of it. The Superintendent's God is no use. Of that I am sure. Whose God then? The God of Kurukshetra? The God of Gandhi?

My father's God, in case he had any? And whose Revolution? The Russian? The Chinese? The American? My father's? Whose? Could they possibly be the same — Revolution and God? Revolution and *some* God? Coinciding at some point on the horizon.

(206)

The interrogative sentence, "How to get rid of it?" like the continuous terrain of other interrogative sentences, posits serious moral and metaphysical issues, some of which are unresolvable and are undoubtedly beyond the limits of the narrative. For one thing, the moral anarchy of the Nietzschean mould and of certain other similar doctrines is not the answer. For the Marxist, evil is strictly a social phenomenon which will be overcome by a revolution, but for a Gandhian moralist, it is both inside and outside. While the battle against evil must be waged both inside and outside, it is the individual self that must become cognizant of evil, fortify his moral will, and then wage a Promethean war against it on the outside. But the irony is that Ratan Rathor is not a Promethean hero: he is seeking identity with his own consciousness and not with the bourgeois collectivity, the culture that is basically disoriented and flawed. In a culture of this type, God and Revolution, contrary to the idealistic position, are viewed as divergent, stereotyped, and finite forces. But if ever the idea of God and the idea of Revolution must coincide, it will happen only in the revelatory moment of inner grace and purity: after all, the moment of awakening to redemptive change is the moment of self-purification and, hence, of apprehending inner divinity. But Ratan Rathor is only an apprentice and he has a long way to travel to experience this type of fulfilment.

Does Ratan Rathor become penitent? Is his penitence sincere, voluntary, and authentic? It is clear from the concluding section of the novel, which reads like a tightly structured moral discourse, that the path of connative self-immolation and penance comes awfully close to the Christian outline of the recognition of guilt, remorse, and penitence, for the Hindu ethical system, as has been observed in the case of Gandhi's moral philosophy, does not admit self-debasement as a form of penance and as a step in the process of moral reconstruction.⁸ And yet the nature of Ratan Rathor's redemption, it must be noted, is blatantly unorthodox, especially in

the sense that Joshi does not induct him into an austere yogic discipline of moral reconstruction and self-integration. Ratan Rathor's moral will is to be continuously and regularly fortified by an assiduous epistemological process that includes, among other things, a repetitive reminder of the rotten and filthy smell of the shoes of the visitors to the temple. The problem of a possible moral deviance has to be resolved by an iterative confrontation with the concrete form of human debasement — offensive odorous smell of the shoes, a bathetic image of self-debasement, that bears strong resemblance to that of bourgeois filth and serves as a stern reminder of the sweat and blood of suffering humanity. Ratan Rathor has gradually recognized the problem of evil:⁹ the nature of evil is no doubt social, but it has to be continuously recognized and purged by a disciplined process of confrontation with the individual self that has been debased in the social process.

There seems to be a much more subtle and comprehensive outline according to which Joshi realigns and reconstructs Ratan Rathor's moral will without subjecting him to any karmic illusion or a traditional ascetic discipline: Ratan Rathor is not now bargaining for salvation but is striving for a spiritual identity between the inner self and the social self. By constantly experiencing the odorous foulness — that is symbolic of collective human ugliness — Ratan Rathor continually annihilates his non-self, thus seeking a definitive relationship between his own moral conscience and social good. Inasmuch as his moral self participates in social good, his sense of identity becomes stronger, especially from the standpoint of his recognition of the difference between the criminality of bribery as merely a legal offence and the moral guilt as expressive of remorse and penitence. It must, however, be noted that in Joshi's theodicy Ratan Rathor's expiation of guilt does not reach the level of contrition, nor does it aspire to the supreme idealism of *Ananda* and *Moksha*. In rejecting the apocalypse and institutional religion, Ratan Rathor affirms the path of ethical humanism. Ratan Rathor does not seek ultimate liberation from the illusion of life; on the contrary, he seeks identity with life, his true self, and the very stuff of which life is made. And in this dual process of self-immersion in the foul smell and of participation in the public good, he ensures a graduated progression of private

good. In fact, for Ratan Rathor the public and the private good are inseparable. He has recognized the root of evil, which is desire or ego, the alloyed world of *tamas*:¹⁰ he conquers this world of desire, ego, anxiety, and fear by surrendering himself — by deflating and “deconstructing” his ego self. He finally sees the dawn of enlightenment, the morning of rejuvenation and renewal. But ironically he is merely an “apprentice” to the more complex and esoteric art of finding truth, wisdom, and equanimity.

It may be argued that *The Apprentice* is predominantly about money, power, and politics, that it is basically about “a New Slavery with new masters: politicians, officials, the rich, old and new” (83), and that the narrative directly aims at exposing social and political corruption.¹¹ It could also be argued that the novel deals with the problem of character-building, since Ratan Rathor the young idealist authored an essay on the crisis of character. One inevitably derives these ambivalent impressions from the deep reflective broodings of the protagonist-narrator, but it remains that he moves into the heart of social reality without merging himself with bourgeois collectivity, that is, without losing his individual identity to perverted communal consciousness. His pervasive and lucid knowledge of the reality of his universe extends from the servile yoke of the bourgeois to the opprobrious acts of social sin and is finally summed up in the powerful image of the smell of the shoes of humanity. However, one must ask perplexingly if Ratan Rathor will ever overcome the penitential foulness of the smell and if Joshi would have considered softening the unusually harsh epistemology of moral recovery. The central theme of *The Apprentice* is undoubtedly the existential struggle of Ratan Rathor, the protagonist-narrator — his idealism and alienation, fall, expiation, and recovery; the narrative pointedly centres on his search for identity, his true self. The structural problem, if there is a noticeable problem, is created by censorious limitation imposed on the theme: rightly or wrongly, Ratan Rathor is allowed only a limited victory. Admittedly, such a highly complex issue is directly related to a writer’s moral vision and his view of human nature.

One may, however, legitimately and dispassionately assert that a criminal like Ratan Rathor should not be allowed total freedom and that to return to his place in community he must continue

performing the interminable act of atonement, of cleansing and smelling the sweaty shoes of suffering humanity. Although Joshi must decide some of these matters in a larger cultural context, the questions still remain open: will Ratan Rathor ever entitle himself to complete moral freedom? Is Joshi in his approach to the rehabilitation of Ratan Rathor an absolutist, a stern and uncompromising moralist? These problematic issues and even some other inconsistencies and uncertainties can cloud the narrative: that Ratan Rathor is still a bourgeois and not a revolutionary may be regarded as an irksome incongruity between the larger theme of spiritual identity and the configuration of social reality. Maybe, the single voice of the protagonist-narrator,¹² because of its characteristic limitation, cannot reveal the whole truth; maybe, too, the novel as a commentary on life and society does not provide exact mathematical analogues and inimitable causal truths, no matter how much harder a fabulator tries to fabulate a neatly designed fictional universe based upon the principle of truth and verisimilitude. But whatever we make of these thematic and structural difficulties, Joshi's vision effectively and successfully portrays the larger side of Ratan Rathor — his search for spiritual identity that includes his concern for humanity. Ratan Rathor is freed from the fear of a possible judgement of society, but he remains bound to his own moral conscience in a voluntary attempt to mitigate the "otherness." Indeed, there are no guarantees of an apocalypse, nor is there a magical escape latch from existential commitment and reality. However, in the process of discovery of self there are magical moments when the individual sees congruence between social morality and individual consciousness.

The story of Ratan Rathor is the story of modern man's alienation — of his relentless struggle to conquer alienation and achieve some form of identity with the object-world. The progress made by Ratan Rathor from whoring to experiencing the smelly shoes of humanity defines the art and methodology of expiation and recovery. His moral recovery remains incomplete, because he has just begun his apprenticeship to the arduous task of moral reconstruction. The contemporary philosophical thought, as Pappenheim argues in *The Alienation of Modern Man*, has tried to grapple with the problem of modern man's alienation, but nevertheless the

issue has become only more sharply pronounced: can man, within the framework of modern civilization, conquer, by his own actions and will, alienation and, hence, pain, anxiety, and suffering?¹³ If we consider Marx's belief that man's dream of self-realization is dependent upon the external forces in nature and society and especially upon the improvement of socio-economic institutions, we will unhesitatingly conclude that man is certainly not free to shape his destiny. In the case of Ratan Rathor, however, Arun Joshi does not let him wait for his recovery until the social order has been reconstructed and revitalized. Furthermore, Joshi even bypasses society insofar as Ratan Rathor's criminality is concerned, assuming, of course, that perverted communal consciousness is not entitled to judge individual moral deviance. But the emphasis, as has been seen, is on the re-awakening and strengthening of Ratan Rathor's inner consciousness, a methodology and an epistemology that, indeed, do not rely on the prodigious growth and idealization of a social order and that, therefore, do not subscribe to social determinism. Ratan Rathor's disciplined endeavour and his moral will have shown him the way of establishing spiritual identity with himself and with the object-world.¹⁴

NOTES

- 1 We may also include in this group *The Survivor* (1975), a collection of short stories.
- 2 See also Lionel Trilling's *Matthew Arnold and the Three Classes*. Note Trilling's conception of culture: "Culture is not merely a method but an attitude of spirit contrived to receive truth. It is a moral orientation, involving will, imagination, faith; all of these avowedly active elements body forth a universe that contains a truth which the intuition can grasp and the analytical reason can scrutinize. Culture is reason involving the whole personality; it is the whole personality in search of the truth" (241).
- 3 I am indebted to Barthes's essays "Striptease" and "The World as Object," "Woman," remarks Barthes in his essay "Striptease," "is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked" (85). As metaphors there is very little difference between a striptease and a whore, for they both represent the "desexualized" female.
- 4 See Marx's criticism of the bourgeoisie in Avineri's *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Of course, the only alternative to bourgeois society is the communist society. "For Marx's theory of history," remarks Barzun, "is above all a theory of things, distinction between the 'real' base and superstructure of appearance. . . . But Marx enlarges this insight into a general proposition: the way in which men earn their livelihood is funda-

- mental to everything else" (133). And Barzun cites Marx: "The method of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. . . . It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. In the first view, one proceeds from the consciousness as the living individual; in the second, which conforms to real life, one proceeds from the really living individuals themselves and regards consciousness only as *their* consciousness" (133).
- 5 "If civilizations are macrocosms of human nature," remarks David Daiches, "individual characters are microcosms of civilizations. . ." (114).
 - 6 In "George Bernard Shaw: A Study of the Bourgeois Superman" (149), Christopher Caudwell uses this expression for Shaw.
 - 7 There are general echoes of Dostoevsky, especially of the psychological process through which Dostoevsky takes Raskolnikov to help him recognize his crime and recover his consciousness. But it must be noted that with the exception of the psychology and sociology of the criminal — transgression, confession, and penance — the two situations are otherwise greatly dissimilar: Raskolnikov kills for a principle, whereas Ratan Rathor's crime of bribery is a case of blatant social and moral deviance.
 - 8 Referring to Gandhi's view of man's inferiority or superiority based on the Hindu hierarchical structure of castes, Aurobindo remarks: "The view taken by the Mahatma in these matters is Christian rather than Hindu — for the Christian, self-debasement, humility, the acceptance of a low status to serve humanity or the Divine are things which are highly spiritual and the noblest privilege of the soul" (486).
 - 9 The Indian thought admits two positions on evil, the monistic and the dualistic. The *Bhagavadgita* traces the origin of evil to the *gunas*: evil belongs to the lower order of nature, *Prakrti*, and does not have any absolute and independent existence. See Radhakrishnan's "Introductory Essay" appended to the *Bhagavadgita*. The Christian view of evil is essentially dualistic. In the history of the European intellectual thought, the Hobbesian view presupposes that man by nature is basically depraved. But evil, according to Rousseau, is a product of society and does not have any independent existence of its own.
 - 10 In the *Bhagavadgita*, the three *gunas*, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, as Radhakrishnan explains, "are the three tendencies of *prakrti* or the three strands making up the twisted rope of nature" (317). *Tamas*, the lowest of the three *gunas*, signifies "darkness and inertia" (317).
 - 11 See, for example, Sarma's peremptory assertion (in his *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction* 276 ff.) that *The Apprentice* is basically about the social and political corruption in India after independence. Indeed, the issue with all its ramifications is controversial. Is the novelist mainly concerned with social and political reform or is he committed to the communication of universal truth? What makes a work of art more enduring? Is art capable of absorbing historicity? Does art have to destroy historicity in order to create illusion? It will be utterly inappropriate to suggest that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Forster's *A Passage to India* are treatises on imperialism and colonialism. Admittedly, in each of these works, there are deeper, subtler, and more profound issues — universal truths of human nature — although they remain rooted in history. In his Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Conrad defines art "as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an

attempt to find in its forms . . . what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential — their one illuminating and convincing quality — the very truth of their existence" (vii).

- ¹² There is no authorial intrusion, editorial analysis, and direct commentary or the multiple voices of a dramatic narrative that we normally get from an omniscient narrator. The entire narrative of *The Apprentice* comes from Ratan Rathor, the protagonist-narrator.
- ¹³ My question is an extended paraphrase of Pappenheim's question: "Can alienation be overcome?" (115). Marx, notes Pappenheim, had believed that the "forces of commodity production . . . had brought about modern man's alienation" (116) and had "rejected the attempt 'to overcome alienation within the framework of alienation,' to conquer alienation within a society geared to commodity relations" (134).
- ¹⁴ A portion of this article was read at the annual convention of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, held at the Portland State University, Portland, 1988.

WORKS CITED

- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. Ed. J. Dover Wilson. 1932. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966.
- Avineri, Shlomo. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969.
- Barthes, Roland. "Striptease." 1955. *A Barthes Reader*. Ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Noonday, 1988. 85-88.
- . "The World as Object." 1953. *A Barthes Reader*. Ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Noonday, 1988. 62-73.
- Barzun, Jacques. *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage*. New York: Doubleday, 1958.
- Caudwell, Christopher. "George Bernard Shaw: A Study of the Bourgeois Superman." 1938. *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Wilbur S. Scott. 1962. New York: Collier, 1972. 147-59.
- Conrad, Joseph. Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* 1897. *Three Great Tales*. New York: Vintage, n.d. vii-xi.
- Daiches, David. "Fiction and Civilization." 1939. *The Modern Critical Spectrum*. Ed. Gerald Jay and Nancy Marmer Goldberg. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 109-15.
- Dostoevsky, Feodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Trans. Jessie Coulson. 1953. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Ghose, Aurobindo (Sri Aurobindo). *Letters on Yoga*. Vol. 22. Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library Edition. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970.
- Joshi, Arun. *The Foreigner*. London: Asia Publishing, 1968.
- . *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. London: Asia Publishing, 1971.
- . *The Apprentice*. New York: Asia Publishing, 1974.
- . *The Survivors*. Glastonbury, CT: Ind-US, 1975.
- . *The Last Labyrinth*. New Delhi: Vision Books, 1981.

- McCarthy, Patrick J. *Matthew Arnold and the Three Classes*. New York: Columbia UP, 1964.
- Ollman, Bertell. *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972.
- Pappenheim, Fritz. *The Alienation of Modern Man: An Interpretation Based on Marx and Tönnies*. 1959. New York: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1968.
- Radhakrishnan, S. "Introductory Essay." *Bhagavadgita*. London: George Allen, 1949.
- Rahv, Philip. "Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*." *Crime and Punishment*. By Feodor Dostoevsky. Ed. George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1975. 536-60.
- Sarma, Gobinda Prasad. *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1978.
- Trilling, Lionel. *Matthew Arnold*. Cleveland: Meridian, 1968.