

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE A STUDY OF ARUN JOSHI'S FICTION



***Dr. Arvind M. Nawale**

The term “Stream of Consciousness” was first introduced by the American psychologist William James in his book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) to denote the unbroken flow of thought and awareness of the waking mind. In a literary context, the term is used to describe the narrative method where novelists describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of their characters without resorting to objective description or the multifarious thoughts and feelings of a character without regard to logical argument. The writer attempts by the Stream of Consciousness technique to reflect all the forces, external and internal, influencing the psychology of a character at a single moment. This technique was first employed by Edouard Dujardin in his short novel *Les Lauriers Sont Coupés*.

There is no agreed precise definition of the term “Stream of Consciousness” and no consensus has been arrived at as to how it is best used. M. H. Abram defines it as: a mode of narration that undertakes to capture the full spectrum and flow of a character’s mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, feelings and random associations. (Abram. 1985: 164-165).

Stream of Consciousness writing aims to provide a textual equivalent to the stream of a fictional character’s consciousness. It creates the impression that the reader is eavesdropping on the flow of conscious experience in the character’s mind, gaining intimate access to their private thoughts. Although examples of Stream of Consciousness techniques can arguably be found in narratives

written during the last several centuries, it is British writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner and Dorothy Richardson who are generally most often cited as exemplars of the Stream of Consciousness technique associated with

the high modern period of the early twentieth century. In Indian writing in English, there are a very few writers dealing with the Stream of Consciousness technique. The Stream of Consciousness technique as employed by these writers is just a tentative experiment with this new form. It is yet to enter the main stream of fiction. Though novelists like Tagore, Bankim Chandra, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Attia Hosain and Raja Rao have used the technique rather experimentally, they fail to portray the inner nuances of the protagonist’s consciousness. What they give is but a series of disjointed and rambling thought-processes or ruminations loosely tagged to the plot of the novel. A few novelists like Shouri Daniel, Anita Desai, and Arun Joshi could to some extent succeed in employing the Stream of Consciousness technique in their novels.

Among the Indian novelists, handling Stream of Consciousness technique, Arun Joshi occupies a significant position. Chiefly concerned with the depiction of psychological reality, he can be called a novelist of the inner world. He prefers the private to the public. In his novels, he explores the inner reality of his protagonists. Since Joshi is dealing with various levels of consciousness of his characters, he found technique used by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner and Dorothy Richardson quite suitable for the purpose of his character delineation. Hence, we see the use of flashbacks, and Stream of Consciousness technique in his all novels.

Joshi’s first novel *The Foreigner* depicts psychograph of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi and explores the individual’s anguished consciousness of being alienated from the existing convention. In it, Joshi resorts to the flashback technique to limn out the inner weather of the protagonist. Sindi remains a foreigner whether he is in London, in Boston or in Delhi.

***Head, Dept. of English, Shivaji Mahavidyalaya, Udgir, Latur**

He could not think about himself belonging to any country in particular and wonders, “did I belong to the world?” (55) He says:

Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that, because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what different would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner (55). The above citation is significant enough to suggest an obvious case of Stream of Consciousness. The foreignness of Sindi is not something external but something, which he feels within.

He is aware of his rootlessness. He wants to love June but afraid of involvement and marriage. “I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed, and marriage meant both” (91). To him, marriage is no answer for his problems. He says:

I am happy you look at the world that way, June. America has given that to you. The statue of liberty promises you this optimism. But in my world there are no statues of liberty. In my world many things are inevitable and what’s more of them are sad and painful. I can’t come to your world. I have no escapes, June. I just have no escape” (107-108).

Sindi resembles T.S.Eliot’s “HollowMen” and “J.Alfred Prufrock”. Like Prufrock’s measuring his life with “coffee spoon” (Eliot 1961:13) Sindi, too contemplates: My fifth Christmas on these alien shores. And yet all shores are alien when you don’t belong any where. Twenty fifth Christmas on this planet, twenty five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. Twenty five years gone in search of peace, and what did I have to show for achievements; a ten stone body that had to be fed from the times of a day, twenty eight times a week. This was the sum of a lifetime of striving (80).

Sindi’s stream of consciousness finds ventilation though his mealy-mouthed philosophies. Joshi employs Stream of Consciousness technique even in his second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. In it, the protagonist Billy (Bimal Biswas) is depicted as a tormented psychic figure. Romi, the narrator, thinks Billy to be a man of “extraordinary obsessions” (07). Though he has everything with him, yet he feels as if

he were a fish out of water. He is not in harmony. In a letter, he writes to Taula :

It seems, my dear Taula, that we are swiftly losing what is known as one’s grip on life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I look at them, sitting at the dinner table, and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of creation has brought us together (70).

Sitting outside his tent in the forest, he listens to the call of hills:

The wind cried in the leaves, the little insects in the under bush; the water trickled over the rocks, and they all said, “Come, come, come. come. Why do you want to go back? Why do you want to go back? This is all there is on earth. This and the women waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of a hill. You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and mislead. Come now, come. Take us; Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night (88). In the beginning, Billy does not understand his fascination for the primitive life. Suddenly he realizes that it is not merely a fascination, but an essence of his existence, a search of his destination and identity. It was more or less the same with me except that I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going? (89).

Joshi has very lucidly brought out the psychic make-up of the protagonist Billy through soliloquies, internal monologues and flashbacks. In Joshi’s third novel, *The Apprentice*, most of Stream of Consciousness passages stem from protagonist Ratan’s reflections upon his degradation. Ratan’s sense of futility scalds him inwardly and leaves him so exhausted that he tells his listener most pathetically:

How do I know life has purpose? Actually, I don’t. And honestly, mine is not the mind that can grasp such questions. But let me tell you something that a colleague of mine used to say. Life is zero, he would say, and, he would add, you can take nothing away from a zero.(142) Just as Sindi, Ratan too, feels that his life has a waste. “My life has been a great waste” (135).

His inside gets hollow and moth-eaten. Corruption to various levels and of different kinds hardens

him and he has now lost the capacity. He shocked: I was nobody. A NOBODY. Deep down I was convinced that I had lost significance: As an official: as a citizen: as a man How could then my actions have significance? What significance was there in steering a boat that had no destination or watering a tree that would never bear fruit (70).

Joshi's fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth* represents a presentational image of contemporary man's agonized consciousness contending with the thread of insanity. The novel probes into the turbulent inner world of the protagonist, Som Bhaskar. In the beginning of the novel, Som realizes that he has "become a nuisance" (10) and has been fooling around "like a clown performing before a looking glass" (10). A roaring hollowness inside his soul and "the boredom and the fed-up-ness" (21) tormented him constantly. At the age of thirty five, he becomes "a worn-out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling" (14). He is always haunted by mysterious voices: ...audible only to my ear, a gray cry thrashed the night air. I want. I want. I want. Though the light of my days and the blackness of my nights and the disquiet of those sleepless hours beside my wife, within reach of the tranquillisers, I had sung the same strident song: I want. I want. I want. I want (11). All the life he sung this song and get troubled. He is torn by the inner contradictions and his consciousness wonders in the maze of the opposite impulses. Som could not find any satisfactory answer to his questions, doubts and inner voices. Som is eaten up by his own "strange mad thoughts". (223) and is incapable of paying adequate heed to the world and its normal demands. His flourishing business is reduced to "a big mess" (223). Finally, he tries to commit suicide. In *The City and the River*, the fifth and the last novel, Joshi exhibits his narrative skill in the use of the Stream of Consciousness technique especially in delineation of the individual's estranged plight, his psychical encounter with reality. The master of Rallies, a child of boatman, for example, is "an unhappy

man" (71) and the real cause of his unhappiness is rootlessness. He appears as "tired" (76), 'afraid of humiliation" (75) and at "no peace" (76). He says, "I have no family, no wish to get rich. I do not wish to become famous; I have no friends to lose. Am I afraid of going to prison? (75). The professor, a star watcher and a teacher of Master Bhoma, apart from his scholarship is weary and tired "I am tired of being careful ... I am weary" (87). His quest leads him to imprisonment at Gold Mines. He expresses in disgust: "Forgive me; I have spent my life in sleep. My life has been a joke, even as the lives of brick- people are a joke ... I have squandered it on baubles" (163). In extreme sorrow, he expresses "I am lost" (163).

Crushed by solitudes and weight of human misery, even Bhumiputra, a teacher of Mathematics and disciple of professor "felt very alone" (157). He was forced to roam in wilderness, after having the feeling of "wandering through a desert land" (176). He excites the demoralized boatmen by reminding them that they are children of the sacred river and they should not sell their soul to a man however powerful he may be. But soon, "A sense of overwhelming futility filled him at such times, so much so that he saw no point in living" (174). Sometime, he feels "so old and lonely and useless" (150). Here, like Virginia Woolf, Joshi eschews the conventional devices of character delineation in series of internal monologues, to give the readers an easy access to the character's neurotic mind.

Thus, Joshi's novels probe into the inner recesses of the character's mind. To suit the Stream of Consciousness technique, Arun Joshi uses the language of the interior, the language of the heart and mind which is a subtle mixture of emotion and intellect, of poetry and prose. Joshi echoes Indian consciousness through the Stream of Consciousness technique and not the consciousness of a Camus or of Kafka protagonist. After all what he gives is a typical Indian Stream of Consciousness revealed through the inner turmoil of the Indian characters in a typically Indian situation.

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- R E F E R E N C E S**
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