

COUNTERPRODUCTIVE VALUES IN

ARUN JOSHI'S 'THE ONLY AMERICAN FROM OUR VILLAGE'

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Abstract:

Arun Joshi's 'The Only American from Our Village' is a very pathetic and heart-moving story. It is a story of a father Kundan Lal, who fulfills his duties and sacrifices his joys and comforts for the best education and placement of his only son. The son, Dr. Khanna gets success, earns money and reputation, settles in America, gets married to an American girl and has two children. He forgets his filial duties and responsibilities and does not turn back even at the time of his father's death. After some years, he comes to India, welcomed by the top authorities and by chance encounters with his father's friend Radhey Mohan, who relates the sad and sorry tale of his father. Now Dr Khanna realizes his mistake and feels the same burning pain in his feet, which was felt by his father walking on the hot sand without shoes. Now, evil boomerangs on him. His moral, social and cultural debasement ultimately leads him nowhere.

Key Words: Counterproductive values, traditional values, modern values, pain, repentance.

Arun Joshi (1939-1993), whose contribution to Indian Fiction in English is limited to five novels, namely: *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and The River* (1990) along with a collection of short stories, *The Survivor and Other Stories* (1975), has a realistic and transparent approach towards life and society. Just like his novels, his

short stories also unravel his keen observation and understanding of crucial things happening in and around his own world. His human ethos and sensitiveness, as found in his popular short-story entitled 'The Only American From Our Village'¹, reveal that he is restless and sad to observe counterproductive values, particularly in the upper crust of the contemporary society.

Here, the term ‘counterproductive’ is an adjective which denotes ‘having the opposite of the desired effect’, whereas ‘values’ means ‘standards of behaviour or one’s judgement of what is important in life.’

The story is presented from the omniscient point of view. Dr. Khanna, the most outstanding immigrant physicist at the University of Wisconsin, comes to his native land— India that he has left fifteen years earlier, on a four-week trip along with his family. He is a very intelligent and fine physicist, whose devotion to money and career takes him to America. He leaves his father on his own in India, settles himself in America and weds with an American girl Joanne against the wish of his father. He passes a happy and successful life with his wife who begets two sons, and forgets his father and motherland with the passage of time.

Dr. Khanna’s tour is a success by all accounts. He is welcomed by an official of the Council of Scientific Research. He delivers some lectures at various seminars and conferences, meets the President and the Prime Minister of India and is offered great respect. His wife and children are “worshipped” (55) by his relatives for whom

they have brought “Gillette razors, pop records and a mass of one-dollar neckties” (55), some cheap and useless things for Indians of mid 1980s due to their cultural differences. Dr. Khanna has a deep impact of the West upon him and, therefore, he forgets his filial duties and pious bonds of relationships. At the fag end of his successful visit after his “final talk, at a college in his former hometown” (55), he meets an old man, Mr. Radhey Mohan, who sells court papers in front of the District Courts and who out of the fraternity and old relations comes shuffling along and insists on “shaking Dr. Khanna’s hands” (56).

Mr. Radhey Mohan introduces himself to Dr. Khanna as “the *ashtamp farosh* of the town” (56). Dr. Khanna, due to the lack of human values, looks “puzzled” (56) at the meeting. Mr. Radhey Mohan is a simple villager, but has sharp eyes on the matters of life and society. He is a childhood friend of Dr. Khanna’s father, Kundan Lal. He tells Dr. Khanna: “Your father and I were very close to each other, like brothers, and I was not then the *ashtamp farosh* because I had property ... and I lived in style” (56). His way of talking, “slant of the lips”, “glint in the eye” and his father’s “accent” (56) makes Dr. Khanna “uncomfortable” (56). Dr. Khanna tries to

avoid him and the blind follower, the principal assists him. But Mr. Radhey Mohan does not let him go.

Mr. Radhey Mohan further tells about his friendship with his father. He tells him that his father and he himself had gone to the same school. They sat at the same desk on which the old *ashtamp farosh*, when he was a schoolboy, had carved the two names on the two sides of it: "Before he died we went and looked for the desk and, believe me, it was still there. So were the names" (56). He could not pass matriculation while Dr Khanna's father, a brilliant and studious student, stood third in the state, had his name on the Honours Board and won scholarship for his further education. Being poor, Dr. Khanna's father had to get education by winning scholarships. But, he made a mark as a brilliant student not only in the school, but also in the college and "if he had made a mark he did not let it get to his head" and he was "always the same" (57) with the old man. It reveals his human values. He was also a man of high morals as he was unaware about "the dancing girls of Lahore" and "such things" (57) in spite of getting education in the same city. He loved his mother very much: "When his mother died, he cried a lot" (57). Soon after his

graduation, he took a job. With the passage of time, he retired. He looked old, older than his years, but he was happy and very proud of his only son, who had settled in America:

He used to say you would be a big government man when you came back. He would say you were coming back in one year, in two years, any time. Then you got married and he was quite for many months. But he started talking again. He said you were the only American from our village. I asked him once what was so great about being the only American from our village. He said it was an honour (57).

The father was very proud of his son, as his son had made some achievements in the materialistic world, but he had lost moral and cultural values by shattering his father's hopes. He lived in his native place and hoped to see his son on his homecoming, but the selfish, materialistic and unresponsive son did return neither during his father's lifetime nor at the hour of his pathetic death. So, if the pungent remarks of Mr. Radhey Mohan give a shattering blow to Dr. Khanna, it is based on practical values: "We had a foot in the grave, all of us what did we care for your achievements; what you did and what you did not do? I told him so one day. He was angry with me" (57).

Mr. Radhey Mohan's talk is quite embarrassing to Dr. Khanna, more so when he tells him of the expectation his father had of his America-settled son who promised him to send "a return ticket" (58) to visit America. But, his father's expectations were shattered when he did not receive any ticket from his son. His disappointment and shame led him to his illness. His suffering troubles the *ashtamp farosh*, who knows the importance of human values very well: "It hurt me" (58).

The old man smokes his *bidi* during his narration and its "smokes nauseated" (58) Dr. Khanna, while the pathetic story of his father does nothing to him. It shows the loss of moral and cultural values of the educated and established sons like, Dr. Khanna. The reply of Dr. Khanna, "I did not have", "I could not" puzzles the old man, but he says nothing. The old man tells Dr. Khanna that his father also had no money. His father's economic condition was always bad. When he was a student he had no money to pay his fees. He had only "two pyjamas and two kurtas and he had no shoes" (59). He had to cross "the *cho*" (59), half a mile of boiling sand in which one can "roast corn" (59) in May. So, he would have to stop at this end of the sand, take a handful of *dhak* leaves, tie them on his naked feet

with a string and then cross the sand. That is how the shoeless father used to cross the hot sand for ten years of his educational life.

Though the old *ashtamp farosh* tells the story without malice and harshness, it creates "unreasonable feeling" (59) in Dr. Khanna, who has forgotten his filial duties and lost moral and cultural values and wants "to get away" (59) from the place. The story moves further. When the father fell ill and the old man sent a telegram to Dr. Khanna who was in America, Dr. Khanna chose to reply only "by a letter" informing about his inability to visit his ill father due to "some conference" (59). His father's hope shattered and he seemed to forget his ingrate, inhuman, materialistic and insensitive son: "He did not mention you again" (59).

Mr. Radhey Mohan further narrates how when Dr. Khanna's father was sick and dying, he and the father revisited the school. And while returning, they crossed the boiling sand of *cho* with *dhak* leaves on his naked feet, as he used to do in his school days due to the lack of money to purchase shoes:

He stepped into the *cho*. I followed him carrying his shoes hoping he would stop, shouting at

him to stop. I could feel the sand through my soles but as I told you he had lost his head (60).

Consequently, Dr. Khanna's father lost his head and then his life: "He walked the whole half mile. The leaves fell off on the way. God himself could not have stopped him. He had fever by the time he got home. The next day he died" (60).

This miserable and pathetic story of his father makes Dr. Khanna only to wince and so his dehumanizing and valueless training in the new civilization has been perfect. Dr. Khanna calmly tells the *ashtamp farosh*: "I was sorry to hear of his death" (60). But the information about the way of his father's death ruins Dr. Khanna's personality. To a psychiatrist, he confides that he has "periods of great burning in his feet" (60). Now, he realizes and thinks that he has been "cursed" (60). He suffers much and his output of research since his return has been "zero" (60). And to people all around, "he has generally come to be known as the man who does nothing but stare at his feet" (60).

What Dr Khanna sows, he reaps in the long run of his life. But, the sacrifices and sufferings of his father go in vain as he

could not teach him the significance of healthy values in a happy and peaceful life.

The short story displays Joshi's artistic perception and projection of his small theme in an interesting and excellent manner. It is readable and praiseworthy for his truthful, forceful and precise presentation of day to day life with counterproductive values in the contemporary society.

Reference:

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