



# The Apprentice: Ratan Rathor's Retrieval of his Innocence and Honour

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## Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive and extended reading of Arun Joshi's novel *The Apprentice*, focusing on the psychological, moral, and socio-political dimensions of its protagonist, Ratan Rathor. Reading the novel as a confessional narrative, the study traces Ratan's descent from filial idealism to bureaucratic compromise and his subsequent attempt at moral recovery. The analysis situates Ratan's personal crisis within the larger ambivalences of post-independence India—where the language of sacrifice and the logic of deals co-exist uneasily. Combining close textual reading with critical perspectives from Indian and comparative literary criticism, the paper explores thematic axes such as conscience and complicity, the ethics of service, and symbolism of purification. It also examines Joshi's narrative strategies and his engagement with existential and moral philosophy. The study argues that *The Apprentice* stages a meaningful testimony about the possibility of redemption through ethical action—an act that does not erase past guilt but seeks to reconstitute subjectivity through humility and care. The sustained analysis here expands previous readings by offering new insights into the novel's formal dimensions and its continuing relevance to debates about ethics, bureaucracy, and public life.

Keywords: Arun Joshi; *The Apprentice*; Moral Crisis; Confessional Narrative; Redemption; Post-independence India

## 1. Introduction

Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice* is among the most psychologically attuned novels in modern Indian English literature. Written at a moment when India's political and moral landscapes were in transition, the novel foregrounds the inner turmoil of Ratan Rathor, whose life becomes a site of moral negotiation between inherited idealism and emergent materialism. The text's confessional mode creates an intimate ethical theatre in which the protagonist speaks directly to a younger listener, unspooling a life of compromises, betrayals, and eventual penance. This paper undertakes a detailed analysis of that inward journey, arguing that Joshi's novel is best read as both an indictment of systemic corruption and a meditation on the possibility of ethical renewal. By pairing close readings with critical commentary, the paper aims to expand the interpretive range of the novel.

## 2. Literature Review

Critical responses to *The Apprentice* have been attentive to its moral seriousness and confessional form. D.R. Sharma, in his influential study, frames the novel as a narrative of 'loss and retrieval'—a formulation that highlights both Ratan's fall and his attempts at regeneration. R.K. Dhawan and R.J. Das have similarly emphasized the existential burden borne by Joshi's protagonists, linking their dilemmas to modernist concerns of conscience and agency. Thakur Guruprasad's discussion of the confessional impulse situates Joshi within a tradition of narrative introspection; Guruprasad notes that confession in Joshi's work functions as an ethical practice that makes redemption possible. C.N. Srinath draws attention to the novel's depiction of 'a conscience-torn man,' underscoring Joshi's preoccupation with the gap between inner conviction and outward conduct. These readings, while diverse, converge on the idea that Ratan is not merely an individual failure but a representative social figure—'Everyman'—whose story echoes larger institutional and cultural failures.

Recent scholarship has extended this critical horizon by considering postcolonial frames and comparative analogues. Critics have read Joshi alongside writers such as Graham Greene and Joseph Conrad (whose moral themes resonate across national literatures), further arguing that Joshi localizes universal conflicts within the Indian bureaucratic space. Some scholars have focused on formal strategies—Joshi's use of memory, irony, and rhetorical apostrophe—to show how the novel elicits both sympathy and judgment. Nevertheless, gaps remain:

less explored are the philosophical underpinnings of Ratan's late repentance and the specific ritualized practices (such as the shoe-wiping) through which he seeks moral reparation. This paper aims to fill some of these lacunae by providing an extended discussion of the novel's symbolic economy and its ethical theory of redemption.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining moral philosophy, existentialist thought, and narratology. The ethical questions informing Ratan's struggle—responsibility, guilt, and restitution—are examined through a moral-philosophical lens that borrows from Kierkegaardian notions of ethical choice and from modern existentialists' accounts of authenticity. Kierkegaard emphasizes the individual's ethical duty to choose and act despite despair; a similar register animates Ratan's late decision to perform humble acts of service. Existential questions of authenticity and bad faith (to borrow from Sartre) clarify Ratan's earlier careerism as an example of self-deception—adapting his values to what society rewards rather than what his conscience demands. Narratological attention to the confessional genre—its rhetorical audience, its performative function, and its potential for moral catharsis—helps illuminate how Joshi structures the text to both reveal and transform character. Together, these perspectives allow us to read *The Apprentice* as a novel that theorizes redemption through ethical practice rather than metaphysical absolution.

### 4. Methodology

The study employs close reading as its primary method—attentive textual analysis of language, imagery, and narrative voice—to track the evolution of Ratan's moral consciousness. This technique is supplemented by comparative analysis with other Joshi novels and with selected works in the continental and English novel traditions. Secondary sources include critical essays and reviews that contextualize the novel's reception and situate it within the broader field of Indian English literature. The approach is hermeneutic: interpretive reading aims to uncover how form and meaning interrelate to produce ethical insight.

## 5. Moral Inheritance: Father, Mother, and the Formation of Conscience

Ratan Rathor's formative influences—the self-sacrificing patriot father and the pragmatic, materialistic mother—structure the ethical polarity at the heart of the novel. His father, who abandoned a successful law practice to join the freedom struggle, represents an ethic of renunciation and service. Joshi uses this paternal figure to mark a moral idealism that is historically rooted in India's anti-colonial narrative. The father's choices articulate an ethics of sacrifice that commands respect but yields no material security—hence the family's posthumous poverty. Ratan's mother, by contrast, embodies a survivalist pragmatism: for her, money is not merely utility but a principle that orders social relations and secures dignity. She famously tells Ratan that 'money made friends'—a claim that becomes a formative aphorism for his later compromises.

Caught between these poles, Ratan develops a split ethical sensibility: he admires his father's nobility yet learns to negotiate life according to his mother's law of money. The novel portrays this dual inheritance not as a mere background detail but as the structural source of Ratan's conflict. The narrative implies that the political and economic transitions in post-independence India created contexts where filial piety to the ideals of sacrifice was no longer a reliable path to social survival. The tension between these legacies therefore reframes Ratan's failures as historically intelligible, though not excusable.

## 6. Careerism, Sycophancy, and Bureaucratic Ethics

Ratan's entry into the department of war purchases marks his initial ethical capitulation. The world of petty officiousness, deals, and patronage demands behaviors antithetical to his father's values. Joshi carefully stages Ratan's socialization into bureaucratic culture: he learns sycophancy, the art of ingratiation, and the moral acrobatics necessary to survive within a system where promotions and favors are administered through personal alliances rather than merit. Ratan's own reflections—calling himself 'a thick-skin' and admitting his role as a 'sham'—show that he is conscious of the discrepancy between who he pretends to be and who he is.

The novel's depiction of a system that normalizes corruption raises larger ethical questions about the role of institutions in shaping character. When institutions reward expediency over principle, individuals may adapt in ways that perpetuate systemic malaise. Joshi, however, does not simply offer deterministic explanations; he

preserves Ratan's agency by portraying each compromise as a choice. The moral weight of these choices is most apparent in the incident of the arms deal, where personal advantage and national implications collide.

### 7. The Arms Deal, Betrayal, and the Brigadier's Suicide

The arms deal crisis functions as the novel's ethical fulcrum. Ratan's acceptance of bribes to clear sub-standard materials becomes a literal and symbolic betrayal: it betrays professional duty, the lives of soldiers who rely on proper equipment, and the moral trust invested in civil servants. The tragic suicide of the Brigadier, who is made the scapegoat, intensifies Ratan's guilt. Observed from a moral perspective, the Brigadier's death converts abstract corruption into human catastrophe, forcing Ratan to reckon with the consequences of his actions.

Ratan's failure to confess—his decision to withhold the truth that could have exonerated the Brigadier—illustrates his moral cowardice. His carefully worded confession (with loopholes) and the delay in sending it perform a tragic irony: the possibility of atonement is present but his fear prevents it from being realized. The subsequent suicide haunts Ratan and becomes the linchpin of his redemptive arc. Guilt here is not merely a psychological state but an ethical summons that obliges the subject to change.

### 8. Confession, Guilt, and the Aesthetics of Self-Accusation

Joshi's use of the confessional mode stages an aesthetic of self-accusation. The narrative voice mixes regret, analysis, and moral pleading, producing a rhetoric that is designed to elicit both pity and moral scrutiny. Confession functions aesthetically as well as ethically: it organizes the novel's temporality, letting past acts be revisited and re-evaluated. The confessional listener—the young cadet—is a rhetorical device that gives the confession its moral horizon: Ratan seeks not only to unburden himself but to instruct a future generation about the dangers of moral compromise.

From a literary standpoint, this rhetorical situation creates a tension between sincerity and self-justification. At points, Ratan's narrative appears defensive, rationalizing dishonest acts; at others, it is raw and self-condemning. This oscillation is narratively productive: it captures the unevenness of conscience and makes Ratan's reversal feel earned rather than contrived.

## 9. The Ritual of Purification: Shoes, Temple, and Service

The image of shoe-wiping at the temple culminates Ratan's penitential practice. The act is small, repetitive, and socially unglamorous—precisely what makes it ethically significant. Whereas earlier deeds were grand (bribes, dramatic speeches of patriotism), the modest ritual embodies humility. The temple setting introduces sacred resonances: a space for cleansing, community, and moral recalibration. By wiping the shoes of worshippers, Ratan performs an embodied ethics of service that counteracts his earlier performative patriotism.

Symbolically, shoes are associated with movement through the world and contact with the ground; they collect dust and thereby become carriers of everyday traces. Ratan's cleaning of these objects is thus metaphorical of his attempt to remove the moral dust that clings to his life. Importantly, Joshi refuses to grant immediate redemption: Ratan's act is ongoing, not once-and-for-all. The narrative thus models redemption as a practice rather than a juridical absolution.

## 10. Comparative Reading: Ratan, Billy Biswas, and Modes of Resistance

Comparing Ratan with Joshi's Billy Biswas illuminates divergent modalities of response to modernity's ethical crises. Billy embodies rebellion and flight: he seeks authenticity outside social norms and ultimately breaks with civilization. Ratan, in contrast, chooses to remain within the social fabric and to attempt repair from within. This difference maps onto differing philosophies of resistance—withdrawal versus reform. Joshi thus stages an ethical debate: is moral integrity best preserved by stepping outside corrupt institutions, or by attempting to transform oneself and one's relation to others while remaining embedded?

The novels together suggest that both responses have limits: Billy's escape cannot fully solve cultural malaise, and Ratan's internal reform is slow and ambiguous. Yet Joshi signals a preference for active humility: he finds hope in disciplined service rather than in romantic withdrawal. Ratan's path is less charismatic but more sustainable as an ethical practice.

## 11. Reception, Critical Debates, and Continuing Relevance

Critical reception of *The Apprentice* has varied, with some reviewers emphasizing its bleak diagnosis of modern life and others focusing on Joshi's ultimately hopeful ethic of service. Debates center on whether Ratan's redemption is convincing or whether it falls into sentimentality. Some critics—especially those who foreground socio-political critique—argue that personal penance is insufficient to combat institutional corruption. Others counter that ethical transformations must begin at the level of personal accountability.

Beyond contemporary debates, *The Apprentice* retains relevance in today's contexts where questions about public ethics, bureaucratic accountability, and the moral responsibilities of professionals remain pressing. The text invites readers to reflect on the costs of compromising integrity and the small practices that can reorient a life. In pedagogical settings, the novel functions as a resource for discussing ethics, public duty, and narrative representations of guilt and atonement.

## 12. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

While this paper offers an extended reading of Ratan's moral journey, several limitations remain. First, the study primarily responds to literary and philosophical questions and does not engage extensively with archival or historical materials related to the period's bureaucratic practices. Second, while comparative reference is made to other Joshi novels and Western counterparts, a systematic comparative study across postcolonial contexts might reveal broader patterns. Future research can profitably examine the reception history of Joshi's novels, adaptations (if any), and pedagogical uses of *The Apprentice* in ethics curricula.

## 13. Conclusion

Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice* stages an ethically complex drama of fall and possible redemption. Ratan Rathor's narrative forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the relationship between individual choices and social structures. Joshi neither absolves nor entirely condemns his protagonist; instead, he charts an arduous path of repentance that insists on disciplined humility as the only credible response to systemic corruption. The novel's insistence on ongoing service, embodied in the repetitive act of shoe-wiping, reframes redemption as

praxis. For readers and scholars alike, *The Apprentice* offers enduring insights into how ethical lives might be reconstructed in the aftermath of moral compromise.

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