

The Homecoming by Arun Joshi

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Quite recently, in my rather long sojourn on the long and winding road of literary exploration, I chanced upon a short story titled *The Homecoming* by Arun Joshi. The story is about a young soldier who returns home from the war front, only to find the whole place strange and un-natural. The story is a dark and stark portrayal of the hypocrisy and ignorance that plagues our society, especially in the self proclaimed high-brow, intellectual circles.

After hectic and bloody battles on the Eastern front, the protagonist returns home and is welcomed warmly by his family and fiancée. He tries to go back to his civilian life- the life led by his fiancée and his family. However, he cannot find it within himself to mingle with the crowd his family hangs out with. His sister takes him to a party and he discovers that the whole lot are just shallow phonies, the kind of people who are big on the words and minuscule on the action. He realises that these people keep talking about things they have no experience of, but they do it anyway because it makes them look and feel intellectual. The story documents in alarming detail the thought processes of a war scarred man who finds the people around him to be hollow. The story is a brilliant depiction of how popular culture and society often paint pictures that they want, despite the fact that they often know nothing about it.

The author, Arun Joshi was a remarkable writer, noted for his works such as *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice*. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *The Last Labyrinth* in 1982. Arun Joshi was an Indian writer in English before Salman Rushdie set the stage on fire, a time when it was rather hazardous for someone to attempt to do what Joshi did. At that time, Indian writing did not enjoy the reputation or glamour as today and the field was generally shunned and ignored by the literary world.

Moreover, Arun Joshi never indulged in promotional campaigns to publicise his work. An indrawn individual, he did not enter literary circles and kept himself out of the limelight and the glare of the media. Born in Varanasi, he completed his studies in the U.S and returned to India to become an industrial manager. He took up writing on the side, as another phase of his corporate life.

The Homecoming is an unsentimental story that states matter of fact-ly the emotional turmoil the young lieutenant of the army goes through in his attempts to melt in to civilian social life. Moreover, the story is noted for tearing away the fake facades under which modern society tends to lie low, modern fads which are but hypocritical. In the story, the protagonist's fiancée tells him that she has put on weight and therefore is going to diet. The young man is taken back to the time just after the end of the war when he had been in charge of a relief centre where he had to dole out food to the refugees. He says,

“Everyone was hungry, once in a way, but to be always hungry, he had seen, was different. It made a bit of animal of you, he thought, turned you stupid.... When they got their ration they swallowed it in about two minutes. After that they could see that they were as hungry as before, that in fact they were waiting for the next meal. The old people had not bothered to look for food. If it came their way they ate it. If not they lay down and died. That was the way it had been where he had come from.”

The story is replete with stunning images from the battle field, images that are meant to chill the reader to the very bones. The story further goes on to relate the doings of a self proclaimed poet, the most intellectual and well read person in the party our protagonist goes to. We see him indulging in banal discussions that reminds one very much of the pointless discussions that occur in our mainstream media with alarming frequency. His rush to define ‘genocide’ and to paint a picture of a terrible war from the comfort of his metaphorical arm chair is despicable and Arun Joshi is bent on tearing away that facade.

The story is about all those pseudo-intellectual campaigners who pretend to have nothing but the interests of our jawans in their hearts, about those poets who write poems about a soldier's widow when they are yet to see even a soldier, about those critics and analysts who dish out trivia on wars and conflicts but could not operate a slingshot to save their lives. The story stands against the hypocrisy and deceit that has penetrated deep in to our society, falseness perpetrated by the elite and the intellectual who have no idea what is actually going on.

The story is an appeal in a little more than a couple of thousand words to stop talking if you do not know what you are talking about.

Aju Basil James

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