

Labyrinth of Life, Existence and Reality in *The Last Labyrinth*

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Abstract

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) was an Indian writer. He is known for his novels *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice*. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *The Last Labyrinth* in 1982. His novels bear contemporary characters who are urban, English speaking and disturbed for some reason.

Labyrinth is a symbol of bewilderment, a symbol of being lost in life. All the people at one time or the other have felt that they are lost, and one sees in the labyrinth the symbol of that condition. The labyrinth is a symbol of banality or absurdity of existence like Camus Sisyphus. The essence of Joshi's thematic concern may be stated as "life itself as a therapeutic process" or that "it is an apprenticeship in soul-making". There is no end or beginning in this process.

The Last Labyrinth is basically a love story. It explores the hero's search for the meaning of life, and pre-occupied with men having a mystical urge. It is a novel extending the characteristic search of Arun Joshi's heroes for their roots and their identity in a more involved technique of story-telling. But the confrontation of the individual this time is not with society alone but with forms and forces beyond the reckonings of reason and science.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, Life, Existence and Reality in *The Last Labyrinth*

Arun Joshi's novel *The Last Labyrinth* won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. *Indian Literature* mentions: "After Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Last Labyrinth* without attaining to former's stature- is the second work in English to portray the passion between a man and a woman. However, in the first, the lovers are symbols for east and west. In *The Last Labyrinth*, the lovers are individuals, operating in their own modest span of consciousness" (28). The word 'labyrinth' and its analogues recur frequently in Joshi's novels. Sindi says in *The Foreigner*, "Even after several years, somewhere in the labyrinth of my consciousness the wound still bleeds. I felt sad..." (68).

Romesh, the narrator of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* at the very outset says:

Life's meaning lies not in the glossy surface of our pretension but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, that I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its call (4).

Labyrinth is a symbol of bewilderment, a symbol of being lost in life. All the people at one time or the other have felt that they are lost, and one sees in the labyrinth the symbol of that condition. The labyrinth is a symbol of banality or absurdity of existence like Camus Sisyphus. The essence of Joshi's thematic concern may be stated as "life itself as a therapeutic process" or that "it is an apprenticeship in soul-making". There is no end or beginning in this process.

The Last Labyrinth is basically a love story. It explores the hero's search for the meaning of life, and pre-occupied with men having a mystical urge. It is a novel extending the characteristic search of Arun Joshi's heroes for their roots and their identity in a more involved technique of story-telling. But the confrontation of the individual this time is not with society alone but with forms and forces beyond the reckonings of reason and science.

The Last Labyrinth raises some pertinent questions about life and its meaning and tries to unravel the still unresolved mysteries of god and death, the greatest of all cosmic mysteries. The almost irresistible call of the primitive world which Billy Biswas longingly heeded is presented on a more intense level of experience in *The Last Labyrinth*. Arun Joshi presents the story with a sensuousness that is all pervading, highly evocating and soulful. *The Last Labyrinth* presents certain difficulty in deciphering the precise meaning of the term 'labyrinth' and the novel's social-criticism is limited to specific targets in society against which the writer's attack is surmised.

This novel intends to include the protagonist's restless search for his roots and his search for directions, those directions of existence. The author's ideals are arrived at more by implications than by specifically criticized social issues. *The Last Labyrinth* can be seen as a tale of two cities, Benares and Bombay - one symbolizing the western, rational, industrial and technological and the other the oriental, occult, feudal and treacherous. The protagonist, Som Bhasker, is a modern millionaire who is guided by reasons and not by faith. Pointing out his problems he says,

"If I believed in god I could pray, may be run a rosary through my fingers. But that's out. Sitting around, I get into argument, with the living and with the dead, with myself. And I have had enough of world's arguments." (10)

Som's troubles get multiplied not only because of the terrible loneliness of his heart but also because of his awareness of the lack of relevance in life.

He finds the world meaningless. Added to that, he is always in a hurry “like a hare chased by unseen hounds.” (12) At the same time his existential quest takes him into “a bottomless pit of despair, like a ship-wrecked sailor sinking into the ocean.” (144) As a student, he is upset by futile activities of life and begs his headmaster’s wife to explain it all. Later, he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complications and resembles labyrinths within labyrinths like the lanes of Benaras. He calls life vanity of vanities, which could be compared only to meaningless flights of stairs or a fisherman’s net. Summing up life, Som remarks that nothing is straightforward and one is always running a sort of a hurdles-race. Some struggle hard to come to terms with life and to find out its meanings but to no avail.

Curious to know the secret of life, he tries to probe into “that core of loneliness around which all of us are built.” (54) Som’s search for life’s secret becomes hopelessly complicated because of his yearning to have the best of both the worlds - the worlds of matter and spirit. He maintains what he needed was perhaps something, somebody or somewhere at which point the two worlds combined. Som would like to know whether there is a mystery into which everything fitted properly. As a consequence of his grim experiences in life, he develops a “new loathing for the squalid world.” (54) He is disgusted with people and himself. He maintains: “It is the voids of the world, more than its object that bothers me. The voids and the empty space within and without...” (47) Most men and women, irrespective of their social status get lost in the labyrinthine alleys of modern life. The tragedy of existence is not that people get lost in these alleys, but that of their either not finding a way out or their being incapacitated by modern civilization from finding a way out.

Som refers to his dream-like state more than once. He says “I dreamt I was in a narrow alley at the end of which a shroud laid... the alley and the houses were deserted.” (105) His past life “had been like a dream” (83) and he is “glad that the dream was over.” (83) Som is a product of twin worlds - the western world of science and rationalism and the Indian world of faith and transcendentalism. The western world is spelt by Descartes, Kant, Darwin, Freud, Jung, Bombay and Leela Sabins. The Indian spiritual world of faith is represented by Anuradha, Gargi, Benaras and Krishna. Here is the authentic dilemma of an Indian with western orientation and education. The cultural background of Som is universal though not to the extent of being as universal as those of Billy and Sindi. He is always haunted by mysterious voice:

... audible only to my ears a grey cry threshed the night air. I want, I want, I want through the light of my days and the blackness of my nights and the disquiet those sleepless hours ... the same strident song, I want, I want, I want (11).

Arun Joshi suggests that applying scientific principles to social problems would only be confusing and confounding people. Som's approach is very close to the scientific methods of experimentation and validation. With this approach however, he does not go a centimeter near the secret of life. Som tries to quench his ravaging desires by possession of an object; a business enterprise and a woman named Anuradha of interminate origin and age. He desires, however, know no satisfaction:

“My hunger was just as bad as ever...later, it became more confused ... a world spinning all by itself.” (189)

It looks as though ignorance would be bliss. Som is unimpressed by what he calls Gargi's mumbo-jumbo, or the religious minded people's half assessed regime mole. His obstinate questionings however would not solve the riddle of life for him. Still there is no doubt about his eagerness to know the meaning of life. He says to Gargi: “I want to know, probably I want to believe, but one can't order belief. I must have evidence.” (213)

Som was born in a prosperous family and inherits his father's anxiety for the first cause. The anxiety is spelt out at the very beginning of the novel when Som's father says: “I believe in science, yes, but science cannot solve the problem of the causes. Not many realize this paradox.” (26) Som accordingly, has an inbuilt hunger for something vague, unidentified and undefined. He does not know what he is searching for. Initially he mistakes his hunger for sex and indulges in sex with several women. Though married to a modern woman he is more attracted towards an antique looking woman, Anuradha living in an antique Haveli of the more antique environs of Benaras. But Som fails to get any peace of mind. Som resembles Ratan Rathor, the hero of *The Apprentice* in exposing the anguish and corruption of his own character in a mock-heroic way and understanding that one cannot blame other people for one's own short comings.

Unlike Sindi, the hero of *The Foreigner*, Som has ambitions and the corresponding intensity of search for solutions. Hari Mohan Prasad mentions: “*The Last Labyrinth* illumines fresher perspective on the earlier novels, because, apart from carrying their geniuses it explores their dilemma of existence with greater intensity and against a wide back drop of experience and relationship.” (20) *Arun Joshi: A Study of His Fiction*. The world of dreams, illusions and doubts has been juxtaposed with that of reality and understanding in *The Last Labyrinth*. Words like ‘dream’, ‘mystery’, ‘doubts’, ‘reality’ and ‘understanding’ serve as recurrent motifs. Som is a rationalist who believes in intelligence and expediency. He has built up a huge business empire and is bent upon buying all the shares of Aftab's company. He has an insatiable hunger – physical as well as mental-crying “I want, I want, I want” (11) without knowing what he wants or may be as Leela Sabnis tells Som. “May be what you want is a hysterical identification. Identification with a god head as most Hindus want, sooner or later.”

(113) But Som is a skeptic who resists giving himself to any faith without proofs, as observed by Aftab: “You must have faith. But you also want to reserve the right to challenge your faith when it suits you.” (166) Leela Sabnis, a scholar’s child, trained in philosophy and a believer in free love, is the clear spirit of reason. She tries to explain Som’s sickness through analysis.

As in the case of *The Foreigner*, *The Apprentice* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* the narrator finds himself in the shattered mirror, and in each fragmented piece he looks deformed and distorted with a funny face and a funny voice. The Haveli itself is a labyrinth reminding one which resists foreigners. In a way Som is similar to Billy Biswas. Arun Joshi has said in his interview published in *Sunday Statesman*:

“Yes, there is a similarity between the two. The faceless god is prominent in Billy Biswas’ inner thoughts. One finds the same facelessness in Bhasker.” (An interview, *Sunday Statesman*)

In contrast to Som, Anuradha exhibits a firm belief in faith. Though born in a downtrodden caste and scarcely educated, Anuradha has wisdom higher than Som’s. At a height of their love affair, the enigmatic woman disappears. She embodies the concept of sacrifice. Explaining this, Arun Joshi says: “Anuradha’s role in this novel is to lead Bhasker through the subconscious. Then he loses her. I was hinting at the old classical dictum that you do not get anything without sacrificing something. So she is to be taken away from him.” (An interview, *Sunday Statesman*).

The novelist has tried to indicate that the more rational approach to life as represented by the western educated and affluent Som is not sufficient. The labyrinths of life can be chartered better through intuition and faith rather than with science and reason. *The Last Labyrinth* thus ends with the possibilities of coming to faith. R.K. Dhawan says: “It makes a fervent appeal to understand the true spirit of India and resolving its apparent contradictions through faith beyond the logic of science and reason.” (49) *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi*. Som, of course, cannot achieve unwavering faith, for in order to do so, one has to make a complete surrender of oneself, including one’s intellectual rationalism. The novel fails to resolve Bhasker’s dilemma. He had always been vexed by the questions of life and death and his mystical craving remains unfulfilled and he continues to remain alienated.

Most of Joshi’s protagonists progress from alienation to existential affirmation. But *The Last Labyrinth* is an exception as mentioned by Joshi. In R.K.Dhawan’s reply to V.Gopal Reddy, he says:

“Alienation of the heroes of my novels which I have written so far ultimately leads them back to community. I realize that in my latest novel *The Last Labyrinth* for the first time it does

not happen.” (62) *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi* Probably the novelist has concluded that alienation is a psychological condition which cannot be overcome totally. Having failed miserably to comprehend life and its dilemmas, Som cries, requesting Anuradha to listen to him:

Is there a god where you are? Have you met him? Does he understand the language that we speak? Anuradha, if there is god and if you have not seen him and if he is willing to listen, then Anuradha, my soul, tell him tell that god, to have mercy upon me. Tell him I am weary of this dark earth and these empty heavens (222-223).

Gargi summarizes the essence of Som’s problem when she writes: “We are all children trying to reach up to a crack in the door to peep into the room” (214). The understanding born out of suffering and humiliation is presented as a possible solution to life’s meaninglessness. The readers of the novel realise that “there is an understanding that only sufferings and humiliation bring and Anuradha has that” (217). Som is “empty of that understanding.” (217) The unwavering faith has been given as a sensible substitute for rationalism. Som’s mother had it and she preferred to die rather than relinquish her trust. Fortified by their all-encompassing belief, saints remain “uninvolved, unmoved.” (173) Even Som, while climbing his way to the temple, finds the sky turn “lighter, brighter, more hopeful.” (180) When he reaches the temple, he comes to know that it is a day for vows. Asked by Som if people’s wishes get fulfilled there, the panda replies: “it depends on their faith. Faith can move mountains.” (198)

To get the unwavering faith, however, is not an easy job? One has to make an unqualified surrender of everything, including reasons and questionings. Aftab tells Som: “You have to sacrifice before you are given. You can’t have your cake and eat it too” (166). Som is a perfect spokesman for the westernized Indian aristocracy which has lost its spiritual roots. Looking at Som superficially, one wonders why he indulges in existential quest. Som becomes a millionaire by the time he is twenty-five. His father has spent an immense fortune on his education by sending him to the world’s most reputed universities. He returns from Harvard to inherit an empire in plastic industry. He has an extraordinary wife who has borne him two children and is all that a wife could be. Yet he “goofed it all up.” (40) He is relentlessly driven by undefined hungers. He compares his struggling self to an ant threading through a maze, knocking about, against one wall, then another.

The novelist creates the apt atmosphere and thereby projects the problem of meaninglessness as an intense one. Som does not lack the education to analyze the problem rationally and philosophically. At Harvard, Som has completed a paper on Pascal. He knows Krishna and the Buddha. Though affluent, he knew that money was diet. *The Last Labyrinth* presents certain specific targets in society against which the writer’s attack is surmised and also presents the difficulties one has to encounter while attacking such targets. This chapter intends to include the protagonist’s restless search for the basis and direction of existence. It is by the implication more of specifically criticized social issues that the author’s ideas are arrived at. The

root cause of Som's problem is that he is relentlessly chased by unidentified hungers. It has been mentioned by A. Rama Krishna Rao:

Soul-making is an awesome process. It is a maze, a labyrinth out of which one cannot easily release self. Right from the start Joshi seems to associate the word labyrinth and its analogues with soul. While the world in its varied meanings often turns up in his early fiction, it acquires a thematic resonance and metaphoric inclusiveness in *The Last Labyrinth*. (13)*The Literary Endeavour*.

The Last Labyrinth deals with Som Bhasker's anxiety and agonized mystical craving that remains unfulfilled till the end of the novel. The labyrinth is perhaps the only symbol that is frequently used to convey the various levels of awareness. The following conversation between Aftab and Som provides an initial clue to the mystery of labyrinth:

"And what is the last labyrinth in the last labyrinth?" "Why, death, of course." "I looked at him puzzled. I meant the last labyrinth of this house." "Yes" ... "Yes" ... he said vaguely and went ahead. (37)

According to Aftab, the last labyrinth contains death. Som's trouble gets multiplied not only because of the terrible loneliness of his heart but also because of his awareness of his lack of relevance in life. He also develops a new loathing for the squalid world. He says:

... I felt a new loathing for the squalid world that carried on beneath my hospital window. All those buses and cars and taxies and men scurrying back and forth like cockroaches. For what? But is it was loathing, then why that long to get right back among the vermin as soon as possible? (46-47)

Som feels disgusted with the world around him and with himself. His mother and wife are emblems of endurance. His mother dies of cancer. The lack of trust in him and others leads him to his alienation from the society. He says:

But I needed the trust. I needed it all the more because I did not trust myself, or my men, or my fate, or the ceaseless travel on the social wheel. Between the empty home and the cluttered office so many men, unknown, each with a quiver of axes to grind between these poles of existence, friendless in a city that I did not love and which, for that matter, did not love me, even though it eyed my money, in this whore of a city what I needed most was to be reassured that all was well. (63)

Som's obsession voids and his little fornications are a part and parcel of his problem. He consults a psychiatrist, but he is not convinced by the psychiatrist's explanation:

You can imagine this planet humming with souls, each wanting something. Of course, many might also imagine that his wants, desires are best met through another soul, if that soul is the right one that no doubt, is big. Until he meets the right soul, there is no peace. When you meet the right soul then, of course things might be peaceful, may even move on towards a higher goal. (74)

Som is still confused. Leela Sabnis, his girlfriend tries to help him by prescribing Descartes' theory. Without much success, she tries to keep the two worlds - the world of matter and the world of spirit - separate. He pits Spinoza against Descartes. Som says:

In the world of matter, we have fed on sex... in the world of spirit we still enjoyed conversation. The two worlds, by her lights did not meet, could not meet. May be, that was why we fell apart. What I needed, perhaps was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined. (81-82)

Som's interest in Aftab's company is largely the result of his obsessive passion for Anuradha. She lives with Aftab in Lal Haveli in Benaras. She is a labyrinth of a woman. Som lusts frantically after Anuradha. He suffers from delusions. He undergoes a definable experience in the blue room of Lal Haveli at Benaras.

"In the darkness, tears flowed down my cheeks, into the pillow. Anuradha peered into my face. I could see the whites of her eye, "what is wrong" she whispered, her hands tightening on my shoulders." (128)

To get rid of her, he goes on a tour of Europe with his wife but there also he has a trance-like flash of Anuradha in her erotic moods. He rushes back and opens his heart before Gargi, the daughter of a Sufi. She tells him that Anuradha is his Shakti. He returns to Lal Haveli and both he and Anuradha possess "each other with singular ferocity, neither willing to loosen the grip." (121) One day when they are under the influence of liquor, Anuradha tells him that there is a god up in the mountains. Bhaskar's world grows mistier by the presence of god who comes floating from the mountains to the room of Anuradha and this confounds him. He goes to Gargi and asks her to explain why after all man has been gifted with a spirit:

The point is that this spirit is there, and if it is there, if man has inherited it, and then what is it to do with it? In other words, what precisely is expected of him, of you and me, of Anuradha, of everyone else? Darwin didn't say how we are supposed to evolve further. (132)

Aftab replies that it is a matter of vision. Anuradha illustrates it further and wants to give up Som in order to make Gargi give him a new lease of life. Gargi's father gave Aftab his eyesight. Her grandfather had promised his life to God, if He spared his son's. For Anuradha, Aftab

and others, they are part of Lord's "leela" which is a labyrinth that includes the first and the last, life and death. At a crucial point of their relationship, Anuradha requests Som to accompany her to the mountain to see god there. Som's mental state is similar to the one painted by Albert Camus:

In this world rid of god and of moral idols, man is now alone and without a master. From the moment that man believes neither in god nor in immortal life, he becomes responsible for everything alive, for everything that, born of suffering is condemned to suffer from life. It is to himself... the most painful, the most heart-breaking question, that of the heart which asks itself: where can I feel at home? (61-62) *The Rebel*

For Som, in the novel, the dilemma is not resolved in the end. Som's dilemma is not a consequence of causes or situations but it is deep down in his own self and consciousness. In the inner world of a man, which is the fountain spring of deeper anxiety this is a metaphorical awareness of human loneliness. Like Sindi Oberoi, Som Bhaskar is a foreigner to his soul. Like Billy Biswas, he is an adventurer trying to know as to why there is a constant blurring of reality in existence. But he resembles Ratan more in exposing the anguish and corruption of his character in a mock-heroic way. Som's experience of loneliness is not a matter of place and company but of the mind.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:12 December 2018

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