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Search for Reality and Identity in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

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Arun is an outstanding Indian English novelist in terms of thought provoking utterances, masterly treatment of existential themes, and skilful weaving of fictional techniques. There are quite a few Indian English novelists who have produced more novels than what Joshi has given us, yet the latter catches up with them through his qualitative works. Joshi has published merely five novels and a collection of short stories, but all these bear a distinctive stamp on its own and contributed immensely to immortalize him in the annals of Indian English fiction. He sets his novels against the background of the changing scenario of the post-independent India. He incisively observes the conflict between the traditional values and the modern materialistic approach to life. He notices the chaos and hollowness in the mind of the contemporary younger generation. With his in-depth knowledge of Indian philosophy, he suggests in his novels an entirely Indian solution to the spiritual crisis of the youth.

The Last Labyrinth (1981) is Joshi's fourth novel for which he was decorated with the Sahitya Academy Award. It deals with an abstruse theme and only a refined novelist like Joshi can take up such an esoteric topic that calls for a great deal of concentration, observation and indepth analysis. The novel deals with detachment principles and the longing for the essentials of life in the mystical urge of the narrator-hero, Som Bhaskar. The protagonist relates the various events of life through a series of flash-backs. Like the protagonists of Arun Joshi's earlier novels, Som Bhaskar carries forward the quest for meaning of life. He has a restless and obsessive urge to know the meaning of existence and life, but he never goes after the 'absurd'.

The actual experiences of Joshi have been a perennial and prime source of all his novels. He seems to have written not solely for entertainment. He has written with a view to sharing his own experiences with his friends and readers. He studies modern man's predicament and his psyche and gives his study the shape of novel. Arun Joshi himself observes: "My novels are essentially attempts forward a better understanding of the world and of myself....if I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my exploitation."¹

The novelist presents Som Bhaskar, 35, as a millionaire industrialist who inherits a Plastic manufacturing industry. He had been educated in the world's best universities at a quarter million expenses. This led to his western outlook on life, penchant for materialism and a faith in reason. He is married to Geeta, "an extraordinary woman,"² who has borne him two children and is "all that a wife could be" (40). Yet he suffers from an insatiable hunger: "Hunger of the body, Hunger of the spirit" (11). Though he is a millionaire, yet he knew that "money was dirt, a whore. So were houses, cars, carpets"(11). He suffers from an indefinable hunger, restlessness

and the great desire: “I want, I want” (11) haunts throughout his life. He is never at peace with himself and spends sleepless nights, drinking and taking tranquilizers. He goes on desperately living, clinging to one thing or person and trying to seek satisfaction in sex, wealth and fame but finds himself increasingly restless and realizes that “I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus”(107). He finds himself in spiritual waste land.

Joshi explores and intensifies Som’s dilemma by focusing attention on his relationship with the other characters of the novel. His grandfather was a man of town, fond of women and wine. His father, a scientist, spends all his life in tireless quest for truth and the First Cause. Som inherits the qualities of both father and grandfather—for he is a womanizer, a boozier, a highly impulsive man and immensely thirsty for knowledge. Som’s mother and his wife are symbols of endurance. His mother suffers everything silently, but her love and faith in Krishna never diminishes. Later she dies of ‘cancer and Krishna’. His wife Geeta, modern, intelligent and sophisticated has a “trust like birds fly, like fish swim”.(63)The novelist portrays Geeta as a great, beg giver of herself. If Som’s trademarks are the discontentment then Geeta’s is trust. She is aware of the pitfalls of the world. She is all a wife could be – trusting, beautiful and well mannered. She remains loyal and possesses a sense of tolerance and courage by supporting Som even during his infidelity towards her. He needed her trust to anchor himself to the world of trust and morality.

Som runs after inconsistently to different women especially the scholarly friend Leela Sabnis, who he thinks had an answer for all his weird questions. Throughout his life he is in pursuit of someone who has the potentiality to settle the contradictions of his life. He does not find it in his wife or in the clever Professor Leela Sabnis. She had been divorced by her husband for her unnatural love for reading. She attracts him more powerfully. But Leela’s world of reason and mystery does not satisfy him. Leela analyses his dilemma as “a problem of identity”. She tells him: “---may be what you want is a mystical identification, identification with godhead, as most Hindus want, sooner or later—you haven’t got the stamina for that --- you haven’t got the faith. You have always been a sceptic. Your always will be.” (112-113) When she affirms that the world of matter and the world of spirit “did not meet, could not meet,” (82) he realizes that Leela was’nt the person he wanted, and the six-month love affair between the two terminated for good. As he says, “What I needed perhaps was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined.” But real life rarely offers such vain wishes, and he remains frustrated and disillusioned.

Arun Joshi’s aim appears to be hinting at the ‘old classical dictum that you do not get anything without sacrificing something.’ Throughout his life, Som seeks for an exit from the Labyrinths of Life but all in vain. The expression of Som’s hidden conflicts of mind; prove him to be the fragments of identity. R.S. Pathak aptly remarks that “Som’s search for life’s secrets becomes hopelessly complicated because of his yearning to have the best of both the worlds - the world of *matter and of spirit.*”³

Som bhaskar finds the world meaningless as his troubles get multiplied because of “the terrible loneliness” of his heart (L.L.23). As time passes he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complication “a labyrinth within the labyrinths” (L.L.29). He compares life to meaningless flights of stairs”. (L.L.37) or “a fisherman’s net,” (L.L.34). Here the novelist depicts the protagonist’s awareness of the lack of significance in life. Som, because of his grim experiences of life develops hatred towards the world, and he is disgusted with the people and himself. We notice that though Arun Joshi’s heroes cannot fathom the real problems of life, yet death is something all the heroes detest. Like his father, Ratan and Sindi, Som too is vexed by the very thought of death. He says: “there was nothing I loathed the sight of death” (L.L.15). In spite of the realization that “death is to wind up all” (L.L.65), he rushes about frantically in search of happiness and meaning in life. Though he knows that life is full of troubles and pain yet he exclaims:

“How happy I must be to have no problems in life” (L.L.98)

The novelist here presents the protagonist’s utmost desire to attain happiness, peace and satisfaction in life even though he knows it is out of his reach. It is this yearning for wealth, happiness and success that brings him to Benaras with the sole motive of buying all the shares of Aftab Rai, a decaying King of Plastic Industries.

Som Bhaskar meets Anuradha for the first-time in a Delhi hotel at a reception organized by Aftab Rai for the Plastic Manufactures Association. He is irresistibly drawn towards her. Anuradha appears to him like a monument: tall, handsome and ruined and notices that she was obsolete like her husband. But yet a strange attraction pulls him towards her, irrespective of her age and colour. The novelist picturizes the protagonist Som as being attracted and fascinated by an antique looking woman, Anuradha, dressed in antiques and living in an antique haveli of the more antique environs of Benaras.

She had the features of women one saw in Moghul miniatures. I was fascinated (L.L.19).

She gradually becomes the centre of his life and the yearning to be with her brings him often to Aftab’s Lal haveli.

Anuradha becomes an obsession, a passion for Som. He cannot think of anything other than her and he neglects his business, his family and his health are in an effort to win her. He makes frequent trips to Benaras with the sole motive of acquiring her for himself. He finds her attractive and sees in her a fascinating personality very different from anyone he had ever known. But to certain extent Anuradha remains a mystery to him and at times finds it difficult to understand her real self.

There was mystery about Anuradha that I had yet to crack. She should have been no more to me than a woman trying to save her lover's (husband's?) property. She should have been transparent. Why should she appear mysterious unless, possibly, there was a mystery within me that, in her proximity, got somehow stirred, as one tuning fork might stir another. (L.L.89).

Anuradha has had an insecure childhood as the illegitimate child of an insane mother. She is subjected to considerable suffering right from her childhood. The novelist presents the agony and tortures suffered by Anuradha through the words of Dr.K.

“Illegitimate child, insane mother, no home. Molested as a child. Witness to murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world. Can you imagine what a childhood she must have had? (L.L 190).

The novelist intensifies the sufferings of Anuradha by making Dr. K confess “My life has been spent amidst misery and suffering but I know of no other human being who suffer as much as Anuradha”.

Apart from all this her aunt takes undue advantage of her and exploits her by putting her into film world and making her the prey to the producer's lust. It is Aftab who liberates her from that tormenting world and gives a new meaning and value to her life and with whom she has been living till now without any formal marriage. She says:

“You cannot marry every one you love. So why marry any one at all?” (L.L.43)

The novelist presents Anuradha as an independent woman who does not wish to marry any particular person. According to her:

“I can imagine I am married to Aftab. I can imagine I am married to you.

My mother used to imagine she was married to Krishna.”(L.L.128)

Like Som, Anuradha also inherits from her mother a belief in faith and possesses a higher worldly wisdom than Som even though she is not born of a high family and well educated like him. In her own way she is fond of Som, and yields to him on many occasions, but does not want to be possessed or owned by anybody.

Som becomes a prey to women, wealth and wine which wreck his life and peace of mind. The novelist through the dilemma and torture of Som depicts his failure in achieving happiness, peace and satisfaction in life. In spite of his sexual relationship with different women, he is dissatisfied due to his spiritual hollowness. From the very beginning a sense of curiosity is gnawing inside him but we find no sign of spiritual growth in him. The novelist depicts Som's incapability in totally or completely surrendering himself including his intellect and rational

power, as a result of which he is not able to achieve unwavering faith. Aftab feels that Som is destined to be doomed in tension. He tells him:

You have to sacrifice before you are given. You can't have your cake and eat it too...

You want to have faith. But you also want to reserve the right to challenge your own

Faith when it suits you (L.L.166)

Som does not venture to solve the contradictions of life through faith nor does he attempt to change his desire from the animalistic to spiritual. The novelist presents Som as a representative of the Westernized Indian aristocracy which has its spiritual roots. Som does not realize that the labyrinths of life can be resolved through faith rather than science and reason. Gargi makes it clear to him that "there is no harm in believing that God exists". (L.L.213). But Som's intellect is reminded of Pascal and Pascalian suggestion and therefore cannot instill faith in him.

Aftab Rai, also a plastic manufacture is the antithesis of Som. He is a man of culture and refinement, more Oriental than Western. Though not a good businessman but he possesses the matured and finer feelings for life. He loves Anuradha but does not claim any ownership on her. His love for her is deep but not possessive. And he respects her personality and never imposes himself on her. Mr.Thapan described Aftab Rai as "a rather peculiar person"(L.L.12) and "a secretive sort of a man"(L.L.13). On meeting Aftab in Delhi, Som found him obsolete and antique. He gets the impression that "he is not organized enough to survive (L.L.20) in the world of business. But Anuradha, who "has a reputation of being clever, shrewd" very well, recognizes Som's plans and frankly tells him:

You are here to grab his business, aren't you?"....."You can give it any name you like but isn't it any name you like but isn't it his business that you are after.(L.L.18)

The novelist here portrays Anuradha as a woman gifted with special vision and understanding.

Som's search for the meaning of life becomes terribly complicated as he yearns for the best of both the worlds- the world of matter and of spirit. He confesses:

What I needed, perhaps, was something somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined. (L.L.82)

The novelist projects Som as a person who is frustrated and disillusioned and suffers in life due to his habit of "romanticizing....blowing things larger than life". (L.L.189)

Som's meeting with Gargi is made possible by Aftab and Anuradha. Gargi, a fair, rosy, ascetic woman of forty, is deaf and dumb but communicates by writing on her pad. Anuradha

reveals to Som the mysterious power and strength of Gargi who is the daughter of a Prince later turned into a Sufi. It is he who restored the eyesight of Aftab which seems unbelievable to Som. At this Anuradha remarks:

You are wrong about many things. You are wrong even about yourself. You think you know lot, when, in fact, you don't. (L.L.61)

Som's lust for Anuradha exceeds all limits and he tries to possess her but he is thrown away by her and she tells him frankly:

I know you want something. You badly want something. I could see that the first time we met. But it is not me. That, too, I can see. I told you so in the dargah. (L.L.58-59).

Anuradha's rejection of him makes Som depressed. He tries hard to free himself from an obsession for her. He tours round the world along with his wife, in order to suppress his growing desire for Anuradha but is unsuccessful in his attempt and becomes more and more discontent with life. He goes to see Gargi in Benaras to seek solace for his restlessness. She instills hope and confidence in him by saying. "God will send someone to help you someone who has known suffering" (L.L.118).

Som's relentless pursuit of Anuradha becomes the centre of his entire existence and the purpose of his quest. He finds Anuradha indispensable to him but recalls Gargi's warning, "Don't quarrel. She is your Shakti" (L.L. 121). This thought makes him to come to that haveli over and over again and each meeting with Anuradha intensifies his passion for her instead of cooling it.

It was fated to return to that haveli over and over. We possessed each other with singular ferocity, neither willing to loosen the clasp. Yet each meeting, far from cooling my passions served only to fuel them. I lived on the nourishment of the shades thrown by her naked body under the chromatic shower (L.L.121-22).

When Anuradha realizes that Som wishes to win her heart too and not merely possess her body she simply disappears from his life. Here the novelist depicts the idea of sacrifice on the part of Anuradha by making her leave the scene at the height of their love affair. Commenting on these incidents Arun Joshi himself says:

Anuradha's role in the novel is to lead Bhaskar 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"⁴.

Som, from "these penumbral regions" returns to Bombay but he has a massive heart attack which nearly kills him. As soon as he recovers he tries to contact Anuradha who refuses to meet him.

this indifference of hers enrages him and he decides to take revenge on Anuradha and Aftab by ruining their business. He buys all the shares of Aftab. In order to acquire the shares of Anuradha, he sets out on an arduous journey to the temple of Krishna on the high mountain disregarding his health. Here we see Som as a man of determination and full of revenge.

At the temple of Krishna, Som is surprised to see Gargi and is further more astounded when he learns that she survived the heart attack mainly due to Anuradha's prayers and pleas to Gargi to save him. Dr.Kashyap recalls the event,

She told you what I had told her. That there was no hope for Som. She begged you to save him.Anuradha persisted, wept begged and threatened. She said to you she could not live without Som and she would eat poison if something happened to him. She said you father had given Aftab his eyesight so why could not save Som's life. She said she would not go home until you did something for Som. (L.L.205)

Arun joshi beautifully presents Anuradha's sacrifice through Dr.Kashyap's words. We see that though she loves Som deeply, she does not reveal it to him. She just gives her love and herself to him without expecting anything in return. Later on to give life to Som, she alienates herself from him and the society. She pays a heavy price to save him; she vows to Gargi that she would give up Som if she cures him from his illness.

Som now realizes that both Geeta and Anuradha had ganged up in order to "save" him both physically and spiritually. But he finds it difficult to believe that a miracle had saved him. He thinks Dr. K has cooked up a story at the spur of the moment. But next day he goes to Gargi to get Anuradha's shares and tells her that he wanted the shares to settle an account with Anuradha who jilted him after his illness. He admits:

I cannot give to Anuradha, you know that. In the absence of evidence I intend to challenge the whole thing. I want to take not only these shares but also Anuradha. It scares me but I have no choice (L.L.213).

Gargi advises him and tries to evade him from taking revenge on anyone. She tells him, "God does not seek revenge. Man'svanity (ahankar) brings him revenge enough". (L.L.213-214) Som assures her that he is not arrogant or vain; only curious to know things and wants evidence to believe things, even in God. But at the same time he tells her that he is determined that he would not give up Anuradha on any condition;

As for Anuradhaas for her I can't give her up on theseflimsy grounds. I can't live without her. You should know that (L.L.214).

The novelist here presents Som as egoistic and stubborn person who always tries to have his own way. Som goes to Benaras to claim Anuradha from Aftab. But Aftab begs him to leave them alone. He tells him:

I wish you had left us alone. Anuradha and I need each other.....I told you you are different. You don't understand us. You work by logic. By your brain. You are proud of your education or what you consider education. There is an understanding that only suffering and humiliation bring. Anuradha has that. Even I have a bit of it. You are empty of that understanding (L.L.217).

Aftab permits him to meet Anuradha seeing his stubborn attitude. Anuradha also entreats him to go away as his life could be in danger in the haveli. Som recollects,

“go away now” she said pushing me towards the door. May be she was right. May be she needed time to handle Aftab Rai. (L.L.219)

But Som does not realize that Anuradha is pushing him out of her life for ever. With Anuradha's disappearance Som starts feeling more isolated and lonely and a sense of inadequacy, restlessness and aimlessness develops in him. He is anxious to know what he wants; and the desire to know is a to make Geeta happy, or be anything more than a stranger to my children..... Then, there was the greatest sorrow of idleness. (L.L.109).

Som's obstinate questioning, however does not solve the riddle of life for him. He has a great eagerness to know the meaning of life. He tells Gargi:

I want to know. Probably I want to believe. But one can't order belief. I must have evidence. (L.L.213)

His approach to life is more or less scientific – seeking evidence for everything, as a result he is not able to trace the secret of life and peace. Frustrated within himself, he finds this world alien having no value, no meaning, or truth. In desperation he starts pitying himself like a person who is completely vanquished by life. His only wish now is “a peaceful death” (L.L.164), for he is mercilessly torn apart by his doubts. Aftab says to him:

You are being torn apart by your own doubts. Your doubts are the wolves that are going to eat you up. (L.L.164)

Som's own “strange mad thoughts” seem to devour him. He is also carrying with him the terrible curse of Aftab:

How I hate you..... curse you you escaped to the hotel that night.....but how long.....you are time will come.....while you live you will rot when dead

you shall not find peace.....from one graveyard to another you will wander.....a million years. (LL 222)

He now realizes that all human beings, whether be it Anuradha, Gargi or Geeta, everyone possessed one thing in common – hatred. Life has become almost a nightmare for Som and he has lost his peace of mind and is incapable of bestowing adequate attention on the world and its demands and its duties. His business is also reduced to a “big mess” (LL 223).

Finally he tries to kill himself with his grand-father’s gun which he carried with him like a curse whenever he went, but he is stopped by his wife Geeta, who shakes him “gently as though rousing a man from sleep”.(LL 224) the novelist here gives a little clue for us to hope that the unquestioning trust and patience of Geeta will restore peace in Som’s life.

Arun Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth* presents a strange case, not of Billy Biswas but of Som Bhaskar, whose mind hovers between two worlds—the world of religion and spirit and the world of science and realities. “The strangeness of Som Bhaskar’s case lies in his curiosity about the food for the spirit and his total surrender to the hunger of the body, the former not going deeper than his skin and the later absorbing him heart and soul.”⁵

Som Bhaskar, like Sindi Oberoi of *The Foreigner*, has the genes of two cultures in him. Though born and brought up in India, he has his education abroad. Like Sindi, Som acts as a foreigner to the environment and also to himself. Besides, Som is a psychological case. A feeling of insecurity, hollowness, and restlessness haunt him throughout his life. Som’s restlessness is different from that of Billy and Sindi. Billy feels estranged in the commercial and money oriented civilization. But it is not the case with Som as he is quite at home in the commercial world of Bombay. His afflictions are internal and the impulses of reason, doubt and faith create a tension in him. Thus emotionally Som has become a labyrinth. Som’s research is in many ways similar to Billy Biswas’s. Both are in search of something unknown. Arun Joshi himself states,

Yes there is similarity between the two. The faceless God is prominent in Billy Biswas’s inner thoughts. One finds the same facelessness in Som Bhaskar.⁶

The Last Labyrinth explores the crannies of Som’s mind. Som is a split self. Like Jungian or Pirandellian man he is full of inner disharmony and is a loose cluster of masks or fragments of identity.⁷

Arun Joshi’s novel gives the clear impression that he was gently influenced by Camus, Sartre and similar other existential writers. However we cannot forget the fact that apart from being influenced by various existential writers, he was inspired tremendously by *The Bhagavad Gita*, though he had his education abroad and had imbibed the western ways of life. Joshi tries to

present the essence of Indian spiritual heritage in all his novels. Every protagonist of his novels resolves the contradictions of his life through faith except Som Bhaskar.

Anuradha, listen. Listen to me wherever you are. Is there a God where you are? Have you met him? Does He have a face? Does He speak? Does He hear? Does He understand the language that we speak? Anuradha, if there is a God and If you have met Him and if He is willing to listen, then, Anuradha, my soul, tell Him, tell this God, to have mercy upon me. Tell Him I am weary. Of so many fears; so much doubting. Of this dark earth and these empty heavens. Plead for me Anuradha. He will listen to you (LL 222-223).

Till the end of the strange thoughts occur in his mind and questions his mind as to “Be them the harbingers, the pilot-escort of melancholia? Of insanity? Faith?” (LL 223). He adds to his dilemma doubting whether to believe or not to believe.

The novel *The Last Labyrinth* fails to resolve Som’s dilemma. The Bhagavad Gita preaches; “He who has no faith and no wisdom, and whose soul is in doubt, is lost”. Som too is lost in the whirlpool of doubts and questions of life and death without attaining any fulfillment; thus he continues to remain alienated. Usually Joshi’s heroes find their fulfillment and progress from alienation to existential affirmation. But *The Last Labyrinth* is an exception. Joshi himself says:

Alienation of my novels which I have written so far ultimately leads them back to community. I realized that in my latest *The Last Labyrinth* for the first time it does not happen.⁸

Som is like Abhimanyu in *The Mahabharata* who is not able to come out of the “Chakravayuha”. Bhaskar loses himself in the “Chakravayuha” of life and death, reality and truth, doubt and faith.⁹

The novelist in this novel reveals through the protagonist the idea that Western values do not provide peace and sublimity of self- fulfillment. In a sense, Joshi contrasts the Western and Indian ways of life in this novel. The novelist presents these two worlds through a series of symbols. Bhaskar’s mother, his wife Geeta, Gargi are symbols of endurance and faith. Anuradha symbolizes the spirit of sacrifice and she is a saint – sinner – adulteress endowed with love and tenderness. She is filled with the milk of human kindness. The world “Labyrinth” symbolizes the mysterious experiences of Som while searching for his identity and truth. Joshi presents Gargi as a symbol of a living proof of God’s presence.

The Last Labyrinth by Arun Joshi is actually set in a world of mystery and the darkness of human emotions. The entire story relates not only with obsession, but also with great love. It gives us the feeling of some sort of salvation. It is a story of memories and huge confusing havelis, and finally of the wonderment of life. Sometimes it is hard to describe the story logically

especially in consideration with the quite different works of Indian English literature. But as a whole this book is worth reading to get the entry in to the mystery world.

Joshi's 'intuitive understanding of human psychology' has made the Last Labyrinth a landmark in Indian Fictional world. The unquenched thirst for self realization, longing for the vitals of life and quest for Identity take Som Bhasker in search of peace and true relationship but the inner recesses of human mind remain hovering over his head and his life proves nothing but an exploration of life and death. Ghosh is absolutely right in saying, "It is a story of deeper seekings through love, a spiritual autobiography of lost soul groping for the meaning of life and death."

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