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CHAPTER - 5

ALIENATION IN

THE LAST LABYRINTH
CHAPTER - V

ALIENATION IN "THE LAST LABYRINTH"

This novel probes into the turbulent inner world of an industrialist. Som Bhaskar, who becomes a millionaire at the age of thirty. His 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 is alienated from life and seeks his fulfillment in love for Anuradha and Gargi which gradually leads him to alienation from the relatives of the business world and makes him group into the Labyrinths of self and awareness. The novel shows that the causes of alienation do not lie outside of man but the world within which is the fountain spring of human despair and anxiety -- the alienation of being Man.

This is the story of a young, ambitious, top business executive in a faceless metropolitan city. Which means the novel could have its locale in New Delhi or New York, and the spirit of place is conspicuous by its absence. And to the extent it is an Indian novel, which it is in its total vision, it does credit to the novelist.

Som Bhaskar, the narrator and protagonist of the novel has gone to the world's finest Universities, though what he has learnt there is in question. Son of a very affluent person and himself a prosperous industrialist, Bhaskar wants to leave no stone unturned in achieving what he wants. He tries to capture and possess anything that his eyes rest on -- ranging from the business shares belonging to another industrialist called Aftab Rai to Anuradha who is Aftab's
mistress. Which vaguely reminds one of the kings of the past who used to capture their rival kings along with the queens, many a time for the latter's sake. But here it is slightly more sophisticated in the sense that Bhaskar's obsession with Anuradha is one of love, a love which, however, doesn't liberate but freezes him as he is extremely self-centered, egotistical and possessive. The novel deals mainly with Bhaskar's self-examination.

Som Bhaskar represents the contemporary Western-educated, affluent bourgeoisie who is feverishly searching for his roots and in the process discovering a haunting emptiness and void. He gets mentally shattered, morally degenerated and physically exhausted with dreams and insomnia. He looks at himself in the mirror: lean, crow-footed, greying and there is the boredom and the fed-up-ness, endless depths of it: Or, he awakes in the middle of the night, depressed, the taste of tranquillisers in his mouth (p. 21). Therefore, Bhaskar wants to be pre-occupied with something or the other lest emptiness should creep as death into his very being. And so he invites people for drinks and gets invited. For, "the open air, chit-chat of tourists, the twilight, quietened his nerves." His sad predicament is that nothing comes to his rescue, there is none to hold him. Even his parents did not have much impact on him in his formative years. Not even the wife and children. In fact, the children are so insignificant that even their names don't get mentioned in his narration. In an absurd atmosphere like this, the only way out is not to allow the mind to think, to question but to take breath and turn the wheel of life like Sisyphus, rolling the stone without any protest. And Sisyphus, rolling the stone without any protest. And Sisyphus was a happy man!. Bhaskar too blinds his mind with life-time obsessions. If tranquillisers, women and liquor cured for the moment his insomnia at the
physical level, business, shares, fame and Anuradha did likewise at the level of the mind. And Bhaskar would have moved as smoothly on obsessions as a wheel on ball-bearing had it not been for the analytical, rational mind (not to be confused with the spirit of inquiry) developed through the years. The major temptation, he had succumbed to was a deep rooted desire to know everything in life, ranging from the outcome of his business shares to the outcome of man's belief in God. His tragedy was that anything that cannot be known or logically conceived did not exist for him. And hence his mental unrest. His wife Geeta is quite a healthy woman living as she does in the world of trust always. His own mother who died of cancer, died in absolute optimism and peace. When Bhaskar suggested that she wouldn't get well at home she had replied like a child, 'I will. Just wait and see.' For she put her faith in Lord Krishna.

The manner in which his mother died was the turning point in Som's life. It changed his entire mental make-up, his very attitude of life. He kept back not tears but a great roaring hollowness (p. 25). What angers him more is the way his mother died than death itself -- His mother believed Krishna would cure her and flushed her capsules down the toilet. Krishna sat on top of her bureau and smiled and smiled, and smiled until she was dead (p. 57). Bhaskar looks at the whole thing as a moral and spiritual defeat which he never completely overcomes for the rest of his life. It becomes poignant when he says he 'sat by the side of that bed one winter evening and painted her nails for her, her wasted fingers, hard as pencils in my hand. I could feel through the skin, the shape of the bones like the bones of the skeleton that stood in the physiology lab at school (p. 69). This is probably the only enactment of his genuine love and concern for his dying mother, an act at once selfless and compassionate. It is
interesting to note the subtle difference between his father's reaction and his own to the death of the loved one at home. Though both suffer from insomnia, the father puts a telescope on the roof and starts tracking the stars, and thus withdraws into a shell as it were, while the son comes out to track the minds of men and women in the world around. It is almost a sickness in Bhaskar to X-ray the minds and hearts of others, not respecting their world of privacy, just as his womanising is a sickness to X-ray or know the flesh, once again not having any regard for the mystery of sex. This is because the mysterious frightens him, a thing he must have developed since his mother's death. Consequently it is Krishna and not cancer that he detests and dreads, it is Aftab's confusing Lal Haveli and the streets of Benares but not the superficial Inter-continental hotel in Delhi. While Aftab and Anuradha find peace and happiness in Lal Haveli, Bhaskar is nervous and miserable. He sincerely feels 'where she (Geeta) had every right to the adulteries of the body, she had only taken to the cleansing of the soul.' And he even knows 'if discontent is my trade-mark, trust is Geeta's .... Geeta trusts like birds fly, like fish swim.' And yet he would not give up arguing rationally. Once, while talking intimately, Aftab tells him, 'Anuradha does not want me to sell (the business). And yet, you know, I might sell it off, if the right man came along.' For Aftab many things made a man right and not just the financial capability. But Bhaskar with his simple and rational mind quips, 'The only right man in business is the man with the money.' Aftab who dislikes this so called practical approach that Bhaskar is fond of, silences him, saying 'I don't want to discuss. I find it difficult to argue with you ... you have such strong ideas. And you hold them. So--so feverishly. Why do you do that? On a different occasion Anuradha had said something to this -- 'You don't realise that I don't
understand the way you talk. I cannot argue with you. I do not even know the words that can argue with you. But you go on and on.' and punctures his ego. 'But let me tell you something. You are not as clever as you think. You are wrong about many things. You are wrong even about yourself. You think you know a lot when, in fact you don't.'

In fairness to Bhaskar, it has to be said that he is not incapable of sensitivity or introspection. When he looks at Aftab and Anuradha together he feels 'envious' but then he knows 'Geeta was all that a wife could be and yet, somehow, I had goofed it all up -- It is a happy marriage from what anyone, including, myself, can make out. I couldn't imagine life without Geeta. But then, and here is the big question -- why these little fornications? I had failed to make Geeta happy, or be anything more than a stranger to my children. My friends thought me a nut. I had been neglecting my companies. I had not even got over my mother's death. Or my father's or the oppressive turbulence of the voids that never let me alone. Then there was the greatest sorrow of them all that no one even guessed. There was the sorrow of idleness.' He also knows 'Fame is a bewitching siren whose song had wrecked better ships than mine. Yet I intended to pursue her.' A study of Som Bhaskar's character shows that introspection in itself is not enough unless there is strength of mind to forcibly alter ones living, thinking and being. It can be an indulgence too, for where one expects him to suffer and learn he gives himself to defiance : 'There was a temple where aarati was being performed. Outside on the granite threshold, looking like a mauve ghost, a woman wailed and beat her shaved head against the wall. As we passed I thought she was going to touch me. "For God's sake", I cried in annoyance.' It is interesting to note that Bhaskar whose feelings are petrified here should become

Alienation in "The Last Labyrinth"
so sensitive and even touchy in the presence of certain things which concern himself. He is almost shocked that his father's doctor did not take the death of the patient seriously but instead threw his arm around Bhaskar's shoulders as though he watched not the cremation of his father but a football match. Paradoxically he had himself said once 'There was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of Death' (p. 15).

Another time he went to a fair looking for one Mrs. Bedi for whom he had brought a cheque of donation and feeling extremely superior and self-conscious and therefore shouting at everyone 'why could not they make her stand in the front? Twenty five thousand rupees was no chickenfeed. I gave her two minutes to show up. Two minutes or I would go. I had better things to do.' There is arrogance as one can see in almost every word here : 'Chicken feed', 'two minutes', 'better things to do.' When finally the contribution was given, Mrs. Bedi did not look at the cheque, but folded her hands. For Mrs. Bedi, the amount of money was not important as much as the act of giving, whereas for Bhaskar giving is a matter of social prestige. It is obviously charity without compassion. Anyhow, in contrast to Bhaskar, we find his wife Geeta already there not helping financially and flamboyantly but working for the organization in obscurity, standing in front of a stall of dolls, holding a brown teddy bear, a badge on her shoulder, alive and smiling. Which makes one recall Ceilia of T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* in the plague-stricken colony.

In addition to his self-centredness Bhaskar has a touch of defiance too. At the temple he sat on a marble slab smoking and peeling off his toe nails. When Anuradha calls him into the temple, he replies 'I am not coming .... Too
crowded for my taste.' Bhaskar did not have faith in God, in friendship, not much in marriage either, nor in fatherhood. He little realised that man had to put his faith in something for sheer survival. For Bhaskar Leela meant well but she was always seeking explanations, immediately, fiercely, she could be a pain in the neck (p. 113). And so Gargi, a dumb woman, comes to his rescue. Gargi was something he could see, touch, physically analyse. Dumbness naturally is Gargi's strength in the midst of rattling men and women like Bhaskar and Leela Sabris, as dumbness is the strength of saffron-robed swamis from India among the gullible, shattered, nervous Americans. Gargi is more a fictional than philosophical remedy to the fever of some of the men and women. When mundane problems such as waiting in the queue for kerosene, or medicine in government hospitals etc. are totally out of sight for an individual, worse problems which lead to a fever of the bourgeois kind are bound to crop up -- a fever which had never been so villainous in the past.

Precisely for this reason that the novel becomes significant now. Bhaskar's fever is villainous because he does not know that he has it. A fever which does not make one perspire and give the hopes of recovery. Bhaskar differs from the conventional hero, here. The conventional Western hero commits a crime such as arson, treason, assassination, falls sick, perspires by way of repentance and finally there is a chance of recovery. But men like Som Bhaskar can never commit a crime, they are too weak for that. And when something untoward is done such as having another man's wife as one's mistress, it is not even considered dreadfully abnormal by the society, for the society is too anaemic to protest. In fact there is no society as such in the novel; there are only individuals scattered around. The tragedy, therefore, of the present day individual
in a context like this is to suffer from a fever which is terribly cold and cannot be diagnosed.

The boy with the yellow pull-over and corduroy cap who appears towards the end of the novel is a corrective to Bhaskar. We see in this little boy an intuitive wisdom or what one calls the tough reasonableness that is characteristic of a very elderly person who has seen life. The boy is frantically after a pebble of a rare and particular variety. But if he does not get hold of it, even then it is all-right with him. And then, he likes to see certain things in life, for example, an Ocean. But if he does not get an opportunity for that, he does not break his heart or tear his hair. The boy's attitude to life is based on what one might call Jalamatya Nyaya, where neither the fish is bothered about the water nor the water about the fish. Still, it would not be callousness on the part of either of them but a very unconscious and yet mature and intuitive acceptance of the existence of the other. The boy's desire never contaminates his mind, nor does the mind fuel the desire. Each respects the other's autonomy. This is exactly unlike Son Bhaskar, whose life is guided by the Markatanyaya. Just as the little monkey does not rely on its mother and therefore clings, so also Bhaskar relies on no one and trusts nothing, no one, but just clings, to men and matters lest he be ditched. He clings to Anuradha and he clings to Aftab's shares which is the product of a fear complex in him. Because once he possesses he stops clinging. He has the instincts of a conqueror. He wants to possess everything on earth but is dissatisfied soon after. While Anuradha, despite her love for Bhaskar, is fairly detached and composed. The same detachment and composure is seen in Aftab too. If Aftab has to wind up his business, he would never kill himself but continue to play his chess—thus taking the defeat in life sportively, that is
gracefully. While Som is incapable of renouncing. He needs to grow a lot more, for that. Som Bhaskar ends where he begins. Like Hieronymo, he is mad again and yet again. In that sense there is no progression in his character. But is there progression in life? Arun Joshi obviously does not want Bhaskar to fall into the conventional pattern of the hero, with different phases-one being an improvement over the other. In doing this the novelist has captured the realistic aspect of life. The importance and relevance of the book lies mainly in this. Som Bhaskar is not so much of an ideal in traditional sense as an effective warning.

One feels there's something deficient in the novel. The author seems to have shut his door on "the horror" and "the glory" part of life. It's largely the easy going holiday life or the Moghul kind of life that we see in the novel. Most characters are most relaxed most of the time. The world of physical labour and perspiration, a sign of health, is nowhere in sight of the author. Visiting people, carrying conversation in drawing rooms, chess-playing, singing, dancing, drinking, idling away time, brooding are some of the major preoccupations of men and women in this book which eventually result in a bourgeois state of loneliness, depression and frustration. It is surprising that labour problems, strikes, lockouts etc. should not figure in the life of a capitalist plastic manufacturer like Bhaskar, or even Aftab. Is the author incapable of a larger vision of life like his protagonist? That is to identify the novelist with his protagonist? That is to identify the novelist with his protagonist. It is possible that the absence of a vital life as a contrast and a corrective can be traced to the serious inadequacy in Bhaskar's outlook itself. For the novelist has created quite a few minor characters who, in spite of belonging to the same bourgeois world of Bhaskar, function as correctives to Som. His own grandfather is such a fine
man. He was a man-about-town, a gourmet, fond of women and drink. He lent and borrowed millions. Twice he lost fortunes without losing a night's sleep. Anything to do with God embarrassed him. He disappeared whenever his wife held Kirtans (p. 156). As one can see there is vigour and health in him as he did not fuss about the existence or non-existence of God, but tolerated, if not respected, others' views without smoking in childish defiance. And then there is the old man towards the end of the novel who has traveled nine hundred miles to die near a lake (p. 192), such is the faith of the old man, faith that is an outside of Bhaskar who does not even know what he wants in life but who is like a hare chased by unseen hounds. No wonder, Aftab, yet another corrective, remarks to Bhaskar, 'A peaceful death, is all I want. You don't even know what you want, you are being torn apart by your own doubts, your doubts are the wolves that are going to eat you up (p. 164). Geeta, a rare wife and Anuradha a rarer human being and his own mother and other characters, one likes to remember here. Leela Sabnis, contrary to the others mentioned above, is the only one who is a source of comfort for Bhaskar as she analysed everything. 'She analysed like other people breathe' (p. 78), while Geeta trusted as birds fly or fish swim! A disciple of Descartes, Leela Sabnis would rather say, 'you cannot have intuition or faith in what you cannot think through'. (p. 81)

The Leela symbolic dimension attained in the novel is considerably responsible for its success, that is, such success as attends it. To sight a few examples : Anuradha is not just a physical entity. Seldom do we see her sick or sleeping. She is not born as other people are with place or date of birth, ancestry, family etc. She never dies but just disappears. Every bit of her is mysterious and symbolic like the Blue Room in Aftab's Lal Haveli -- where both the Blue Room
and Lal Haveli are symbolic of a state of mind. The plastic manufacturing
profession of Bhaskar is intensely symbolic of Bhaskar’s own plastic texture
which is flashy and flimsy but which nevertheless is Man’s creation and therefore
asserts itself and wants to impertinently compete with God-made metals. But the,
ours is the Plastic age, where plastic people like Som Bhaskar with a plastic view
of life exist. Here is a novelist who seems to have been influenced by Western
European novelists like Camus and Kafka. Echoes of Kafka’s Trial can be sensed
in The Last Labyrinth. The stuffy atmosphere in the Blue Room, the confusing
Lal Haveli, the manner of addressing Dr. Kashyap as merely K. are all echoes of
the Trial. But that is no detraction from the merit of the novel, which is a
continuing (continuing from his previous novels) concern for a certain type of
individual-ambitious, affluent, possessive, rational, self-centred and
introspective, by turns -- with a seriousness that should mark him out as a
novelist to reckon with.

The Last Labyrinth is a more ambitious novel extending the
characteristic search of Arun Joshi’s heroes for roots and identification in a more
involved technique of story telling. But the confrontation of the individual this
time is not with society but with forms and forces beyond the reckonings of
reason and science. Som was born in a prosperous business family inheriting his
father’s anxiety for the First cause. The anxiety is spelt out at the very beginning
of the novel when his father says -- "I believe in science, yes, but science cannot
solve the problem of the causes. Not many realize this paradox" (26) Som,
accordingly, had an inbuilt hunger for something vague, undefined and
unidentified -- "If only one knew what one wanted. Or, may be, to know was
what I wanted", as he says. Initially, he mistakes his hunger for sex and indulges

*Alienation in "The Last Labyrinth"*
in sexcapades with several women. But he fails to arrive at any peace of mind to arrive at any peace of mind. Though married to a modern girl Geeta he is more attracted towards an antique looking woman, Anuradha, living in an antique Haveli of the more antique environs of Benaras. Anuradha came of very insecure childhood. She was an illegitimate child born of an insane mother. She was molested as a child and was witness to murders and suicides. She was exploited by her aunt, who tried to put her on the screen, and made a prey of lust by the producers. Som met her while striking a business deal with Aftab. She had been living with Aftab without any formal marriage. For she believed -- "You can't marry everyone you love. So why marry anyone at all" (43). With all the deprivations and sufferings behind her she was a woman "gifted with a special vision, a vantage point high above the earth from where she could see the melee below as ordinary men could not" (58). She believed in God and was devoted to the love of Krishna whereas, Som was a rationalist who believed in intelligence and expediency. He had built up a huge business empire and was bent upon buying all the shares of Aftab's Company. He, therefore, had an insatiable hunger -- physical, mental and material, crying "I want, I want. I want. I want." (11). He didn't know what he wanted. "Or may be", as Leela says, "may be what you want is a mystical identification, identification with a godhead, as most Hindus want, sooner or later" (113). But, Som was always a sceptic, who resisted giving himself to any faith without proofs, as observed by Aftab -- "You want to have faith. But you also want to reserve the right to challenge your own faith when it suits you" (166). He learns from the history of Gargi and Anuradha how all actions and aspirations of life can be an offering to Lord Krishna. In his growing understanding he now realizes that "Spirit is there. And if it is there. If man has
inherited it, then what is he to do with it? .... Drawin didn't say how we are supposed to evolve further" (132). He further broods -- "was there a mystery into which everything fitted? Reality was so like an iceberg. You never saw the whole of it" (161). Anuradha could allow Som to love her and have sex with her but never to be separated from Aftab. When he finally goes to meet her at Aftab's Haveli in Benaras he senses a foul play in the mysterious disappearance of Anuradha but there are no proofs to confirm his doubts against Aftab. And when Dr. Kashyap narrates the way Som had been saved of death from a deadly heart attack by the miracle performed by Anuradha and Gargi he is forced to confess -- "Probably, I want to believe. But one can't order belief" (213). One has to be born in it "to reach up to a crack in the door to peep into a room", or "one had probably to rise up to the crack by oneself" (215).

The Last Labyrinth, thus ends with the probable possibilities of coming to faith. It makes a fervent appeal to understand the true spirit of India and resolve its apparent contradictions through faith beyond the logic of science and reason. Som sees directly in line with Sindi, a foreigner to his soul; with Billy, an adventurer trying to know as to why there is a constant blurring of reality in existence; and with Ratan, an explorer as to how man is perpetually trapped in the net of his own cunning. He resembles Ratan more, in exposing the anguish and corruption of his own character in a mock-hercic way and understanding that one cannot blame other people for one's own shortcomings. Unlike Sindi, he has ambitions, action and the corresponding intensity of search for solutions. It is an irony that Som should not be in a position to give up his reason in the very thick of miracles and intimations of supernatural powers, symbolizing the modern man. The custodian of Haveli, Aftab Rai, and the Haveli
itself, is a labyrinth, reminding one of Wuthering Heights, which resists foreigners. One cannot probe much about the antecedents of Aftab Rai or the intricacies of Haveli. As representatives of antiquity they remain a mystery. Anuradha, who tries to reach out of Haveli to the new world of Som in Bombay is done to death. The connexion is broken. But somewhere, in the heart of his heart, Som has been able to talk in Forster's words, to connect like Billy.

Arun Joshi thus uses the image of a foreigner as a myth. In all his novels his heroes act as foreigner either to the environment society or to themselves. They are foreigners because they are exposed either by their sensitivity, lack of identification with the world around or a knowledge of themselves. Joshi uses this motif so extensively that it takes on the character of a myth. Sindi is a foreigner in the fullest sense of the word. Billy is a foreigner because he can't identify himself with the society of which he is a product. Ratan has knowledge of himself without discrimination and resolution. His novels seem to say that we are all foreigners placed as we are. Of the four heroes Billy alone is able to come out of this predicament successfully and convincingly. He therefore, is presented in the image of a rebel and others as helpless compromisers. While Sindi, Ratan and Som act as victims of circumstances, the reason why Billy never introspects like Sindi Som and Ratan is that, while other rationalize he "totalizes", to borrow the term from The Savage Mind of Claude Levi-Strause. The talk of illusions in his novels seems to admit the existence of a reality which is not illusory and that besides our sense impressions there is an external world which can be comprehended by "surimpressionism". Sindi was sorry to deny the reality of June Blyth. For Billy the Maikala Hills were the only reality. For Ratan his career and for Som, his reason. In the characters of Sindi,

Alienation in "The Last Labyrinth"
Ratan and Som the novelist has been able to achieve a further excellence by separating the self that suffers from self. In doing this Arun Joshi has added a new dimension to character portrayal in Indo-English fiction.

His vision is coloured by a certain love of primitivism as against society. He is against careers and collective man. He wants acculturation of modern man. He is specially disillusioned over the post-freedom trends of degeneration in India. But the human need to live is more profound in him than death. To be of use to others is his most emphatic assertion in all his novels. Shamming and hypocrisy and cowardice are condemned as the worst of evils. Although Joshi brings in images of God in his novels but he is not apocalyptic, when Romesh asks Billy if he was looking for God -- "Revolution of God" or "The God of Kurukshetra" (148) as the only way out for India. Som is almost near believing in God but his habit of seeking evidence frustrates his efforts to come to terms with reality. Believe it or not, there exists a world beyond the bounds of reason and science, the novel seems to assert. The puzzles and contradictions of life cannot but be resolved through faith. That is why despite of all the corruption and degeneration there are no villains in the world of Joshi. Fear, insecurity and cowardice are the real evils. In the case of Billy it is the society which is a villain but in the case of Sindhi, Ratan and Som it is narrow expediency which becomes one's own trap. For Arun Joshi, all these consequences of anxiety follow from the lack of well defined vision of life and confidence in one's own rightness of action, so artistically portrayed in The Last Labyrinth. For this reason his novels seem incomplete in terms of fictional form and meaning. But "Since reality is incomplete art must not be too afraid of incompleteness", confirms Iris Murdoch. Besides this' Arun Joshi fulfils the
most urgent artistic demand of today -- the fictiveness of fiction' without going absurd.

This novel, The Last Labyrinth (1981), probes into the turbulent inner world of an industrialist, Som Bhaskar, who becomes a millionaire at the age of thirty. He is married to a woman of his choice, who has borne him two children and is all that a wife could be, yet he 'goofed it all up' (p. 40) and is relentlessly driven by undefined hungers. Amidst intriguing juxtapositions, the novel plunges into a haunting world of life, love, God and Death, the greatest of all mysteries -- 'the last labyrinth'. With its spiritual and sensuous dimensions interwoven it is a story of deeper seekings through love. The novel raises some pertinent questions about life and its meaning and tries to unravel the still unresolved mysteries of God and Death.

The root cause of Som's problems is that he is relentlessly chased by undefined hungers. He is always haunted by mysterious voices.

"..... 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 of those sleepless hours .... I had sung the same strident song : I want, I want."

Som's troubles get multiplied not only because of 'the terrible loneliness' of his heart (p. 23) but also because of his awareness of the lack of relevance in life. He finds the world meaningless. As a student he was upset by futile activities of life and begged the Headmaster's wife to explain the meaning of it all (p. 24). Later he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complications -- 'labyrinths within Labyrinths' (p. 29) like the lanes of Benaras.
He calls life 'vanity of vanities,' (p. 32), which could be compared only to 'meaningless flights of stairs' (p. 34) or 'a fisherman's net' (p. 37). Summarizing his opinion about life, Som remarks: "Nothing was straightforward. One was always running a hurdles race" (p. 133). He would like to know whether there was a mystery about life into which everything fitted properly (p. 161). As a consequence of his grim experiences in life, he develops a new loathing for the squalid world, (p. 46). He is disgusted with people and himself. He maintains: "It is the voids of the world, more than its objects, that bother me." (p. 47)

Som rushes about in search of happiness and meaningfulness in life. "How happy I must be," he exclaims. "to have no problem in life" (p. 98). But life is teeming with troubles and pains, which are all the more keenly felt by sensitive people. The greatest dilemma of human life is its ultimate reality, i.e. death. Like his father, Som is vexed by the mere thought of it. He says, "There was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death" (p. 15). He wants to know its secret 'without nagging, enervating doubts' (p. 53). The questions about life and death continue to haunt him throughout his life "And always invarious shades of coherence, "he confides, "the spoken or unspoken question, like a vulture, corpse of my life; what lay in the last labyrinth?" (p. 122). Asked by him as to what lies in the last labyrinth in the Lal Haveli, Aftab replies: 'Why, death, of course' (p. 37).

Som could not find any satisfactory answer to his questions. Being a highly rational person, he would not accept any ready-made solution to his problems, such as irrational belief in supernatural elements or blind adherence to fatalism or determinism. His father, a chemist turned a businessman, emphasized
'everything happens in cycles: Birth Growth, Decline and Death' (p. 27). He wondered if there could not possibly be a First Cause behind the creation of the universe, which he regarded to be 'the expression of a will', though he had no evidence to believe that there was a divine will (p. 204). He was, subsequently, pushed off to the edge of melancholia by these 'bigger interrogations' and 'a knowledge of varieties sparsely known among ordinary men' (p. 156). Som has no 'explanation' to life's problems and as an ardent believer in Darwin, feels bogged down when he finds that Darwin did not say how we are supposed to evolve further (p. 132). His search after 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. He maintains: "What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined" (p. 82).

Som is, naturally, unimpressed by what he calls Gargi's 'mumbo-jumbo' (p. 163) or the religious minded people's 'half-assessed rigmarole' (p. 208). His obstinate questionings, however, would not solve the riddle of life for him. There is no doubt about his eagerness to know the meaning of life. He says to Gargi: "I want to know. Probably, O want to believe. But one can't order belief. I must have evidence" (p. 213). His approach is very close to the scientific methods of experimentation and validation. With this approach, however, he does not go an inch near the secret of life. In his desperation, he even plans to visit temples every evening. He begins, ultimately, to nurture self pity and, like one who has been completely vanquished by life, utters the terrible death wish. 'A peaceful death', that is all he wants, for he is mercilessly torn apart by his doubts (p. 164). He is eaten up by his own 'strange mad thoughts' (p. 223) and is incapable of paying adequate need to the world and its normal demands. His
flourishing business is reduced to 'a big mess' (p. 223). Finally, when he tries to kill himself, he is stopped by Geeta 'who shakes him' gently as though rousing a man from sleep (p. 223). We are given to believe that the unquestioning trust of his intelligent and understanding wife will restore peace to his life.

Joshi has also tried to present in his novels solutions to problems arising out of one's awareness of the purpose or meaning of life. The most devastating effect that ubiquitous meaninglessness can have is the stifling of spontaneity of the individual's personality. Which has been conceived in terms of the 'spontaneous assertion of (one's) individual initiative, feelings, wishes, (and) opinions. A realization of the meaninglessness in life is a prelude to its diagnosis and cure. As Knoff suggests, the process of creating meaninglessness itself becomes centrally states of alienation, including meaninglessness, tend to become in proper hands quests for value, significance, meaning and transcendence. It would therefore be worth while to evaluate in some detail the solutions suggested by Joshi in his novels.
REFERENCES

1. The Last Labyrinth; Arun Joshi, Delhi, Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi - 1, 1981.
