Arun Joshi as a writer is the writer of the insight not only of the outer world but the world within the self. His search of the identity and the meaning to the identity that the materialistic world gives is pertinent not only to his personality as such but the connotation of that has been given to the literary world by different works he has contributed to the Indian writings in English.

The Last Labyrinth won Arun Joshi the Sahitya Academy Award, India’s most prestigious literary prize. Written in the first person, like The Foreigner and The Apprentice, it is an uncompromising search inside the deepest recesses of the human soul, hence one of the symbolic meanings the title acquires. The personal, intimate tone of the narrative, at times giving the reader the impression of a diary, suggests an autobiographical dimension: the protagonist, Som Bhaskar, is an industrialist like his creator. A sort of arrival point in the whole of Joshi’s fiction, Som incarnates the quintessential male hero in the literary production of his author: intelligent, sensible, curious, self-centered, somewhat indrawn, well-educated, he is always in precarious balance between Hamletesque choices and divergent worlds which split his personality in two, his predicament mirrored in his very name: Som meaning sun and Bhaskar moon.
Som’s counterpart and lover is Anuradha and it almost goes without saying that she is the quintessential woman in Joshi’s novels. As one reads in the first pages, hers is the name of a star, and digging back in her past one learns that she had been a cinema star: nevertheless, her ambiguous role almost instinctively drives her to act as a sort of celestial entity, a guide steering Som onto the right path. Halfway between a cruel, indifferent femme fatale, and an ethereal spiritual escort, a character caught somewhere between the interstices of whim and sacrifice, she is, like Som, clearly a seeker: however, female and male nature differentiates in that she is a “giver”, while Som is a “wanter”.

As is evidenced in a crucial passage, worth quoting, Joshi sees the sign of the human condition and existence in this bi-polarity:

There are the wanters of this world and there are the givers. And, often, the wanters, I know, don’t recognise the givers, or vice-versa. And most of the times, the wanters don’t even know that they are the wanters or the givers. And if they know, they are too shy to admit. Or, too proud. And so they wander on the streets of the world on opposite pavements, burning in their anger, to take or to give, and do not lift their gaze and, finally, fall in the dust of the road. So it goes (34).
The triangle is completed as one takes into consideration the setting of the story, the weird and aged haveli in old Benares. This strange house in which Anuradha and her husband Aftab live is the result of the multi-style experiments by eccentric architects who added various parts to it over the years. The effect is a labyrinthine habitation, which is at the same time a real residence and a fitting metaphor for the desperately frantic and unconscious search engaged in by the typical Joshi seeker. Inside this house, everything is on the verge of folly, schizophrenia, hallucination. This haveli hides a secret.

An existentialist novelist writing in line with Albert Camus and Franz Kafka, Arun Joshi shifted his focus from social realism to psychological realism. Existentialism was a twentieth century phenomena which challenged the then established order of the universe as a divine, moral, absolute system. Instead, it pointed out the aimless existence of a man who is indifferent to everything and alien to everybody. Forces of industrialisation and urbanisation have exerted a deleterious influence on the life of man. Joshi has explored the depths of the psyche of an individual trapped in the matrix of decaying human values. Arun Joshi’s works are an illustration of the Indian variety of existentialism.

His works are not a product of the imaginative work for the creative writing world. Rather it is something which is close to him in
reality and that is true because he has accepted that much of his writing is his autobiographical sketches from his stay in America as a student to the world of unseen mystery in India. Arun Joshi’s novel conforms to Conrad’s conception of the novel wherein Joshi recognizes a truth beyond the mere phenomenal world which could be conceptualised and captured by the artist not merely by the imagination but by the consistent form to the shapeless facts and forms of the human existence. The theme and the motive that Arun Joshi gives to the novel are not based on scientific observation merely but on discovering the reality which lies hidden in the actuality of his own life. To understand the novels of Arun Joshi, one need to keep in mind that what he is writing is not the causal effect that he is trying to establish. Rather it is his experimentation with the moments of the acute suffering situations of human life to study the human predicament psychologically.

**The Last Labyrinth** is like other novels of Arun Joshi. It requires an understanding of the revelation of a world where human race is confronted by the self and the question of his /her existence is directly correlated with the identity issues. An illustrious novel, **The Last Labyrinth**, ideally depicts the craziness, pain, agony and selfishness of love. The title of the story is self-explanatory in the sense that at the end of the story one of the characters, Anuradha, disappeared in the last labyrinth to hide herself from the central character, Som. **The Last*
Labyrinth is classical in its sense and meaning but modern in perception, whereas medieval in its backgrounds and plots. The understanding of the novel requires the reader to understand it through a multi-dimensional approach, since with the meaning and quest for identity of life, at any particular juncture of life, can be better perceived through it.

The Last Labyrinth by Arun Joshi is the story of Som Bhaskar. He is a unique character. The dichotomy and the conflict in his character are made apparent through his name itself, which means Moon-Sun. He is a twenty five years old man who inherits his father’s vast industrial wealth. Som is married to Geeta, a devout woman. But he is attracted to Anuradha, who is an alluring and mysterious woman. She is also married to Aftab, a businessman, but Som finds her irresistible. In the whole novel, the way of getting her is described in a vivid manner. Her conduct is beyond Som’s comprehension. She accepts, rejects, or flees from him without warning, and he even suspects that she has some agreement with Geeta. The situation drives Som to the brink of death from a heart attack, but he miraculously survives while Anuradha disappears without a trace. After his recovery, he is hell-bent upon finding Anuradha. His frantic pursuit to search Anuradha leads him through absurd situations. Som eventually learns that Anuradha had decided to sacrifice her love for him in order
to save him from death at the time of his heart attack. Agnostic and proud, Som rejects this explanation and continues his vehement quest, which eventually leads him to Anuradha’s haveli. In a desperate effort to again flee from him, she disappears in the last labyrinth, leaving him in doubt whether she has committed suicide or has been killed. Alone and exhausted, Som goes on addressing his thoughts to her in the form of a prayer.

The Last Labyrinth is actually set in a world of mystery and the darkness of human emotions. The entire story deals 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 wonder of life. Sometimes it is hard to describe the story logically, especially in the context of quite different works of Indian English literature. But as a whole, the book is worth reading to enter the world of mystery.

In The Last Labyrinth, the hero, if that always is not too strong a term for the men Joshi puts at the centre, is a man crying always: “I want! I want!” and not knowing what it is he desires, in some ways a parallel figure to Saul Bellow’s Henderson, the rain king. His search takes him, however, to infinitely old Benares, a city seen as altogether intangible, at once holy and repellent, and to an extent lost in a miasma of non-understanding. But the description way there is gripping. Joshi
writes with a persuasive ease and illuminates the outward scene with a
telling phrase after telling phrase.

The nature of identity-formation indicates that the character is
only moulded by a single aspect. Rather it is by various aspects. The
identity that one gets in the mature age of one’s life is not built in a
daya rather it has its genesis in the childhood and grows with the age.
However, its base is moulded during the childhood of the character. In
the case of Som Bhaskar, seemingly the novel uses the plot to describe
that he had been denied the love and affection of both his mother and
father. Even at the death of his mother, he was deprived the
opportunity to participate in her funeral rituals though the reason cited
for it is that it would have adversely affected his studies. This
deprivation has certainly led a lack of touch -therapy of the opposite
gender and that is why it is later perceived in a different manner. The
novel depicts that when Som was in front of the wife of the
Headmaster and she touched him to give the heeling touch of the
affection of the mother by putting her hand to the hair of Som, Som did
not perceive it as an affectionate gesture. Instead, for him it has sensual
connotations. Had Som been given the affection of mother, he might
have not felt a sense of the sensuality in the mother like careers of the
Headmaster’s wife. It marks the beginning of identity-formation for
Som. Identity-conflict is evident in the childhood of Bhaskar from here onwards.

To augment the identity-conflict of childhood, one can relate it with maturity of Bhaskar, because when he with Anuradha, Som does say that he had met her ten years back when he was merely twenty-one-year old. It symbolises that the touching of Anuradha for Som is not different from the touching of the headmaster’s wife and he fails to differentiate the past and the present. This is the conflict in reality.

The internal factor for the identity-conflict starts taking shape as the story starts moving ahead. Som becomes a millionaire at the age of twenty five. The age of twenty-five in a psychological sense is the age of struggle and learning. But he inherits what he was supposed to earn. It makes him a man with everything but without anything. It is so because he fails to learn the methodology to differentiate between the good and the bad. He has everything in life--an extraordinary wife, a fine education and, in inheritance, a plastic factory with a name to reckon with in the industrial world of Bombay the world marked by with the primary ambition to grab the failing industries.

As the story moves ahead, one sees the other faces of his character. He flirts from one pleasure to another, symbolising the incarnation of joy of life and thus goes for experimentation and experiences, whether they concern business or fornication. But,
unfortunately, far from the attainment of the sense of fulfilment, he finds a void and the void is both within and without. Everything in this mysterious world, he finds, is “a haze” (Joshi, The Last 47).

Som’s cry of “I want, I want” (Joshi, The Last 11) haunts him all the time. Knowing not what is it that he desires, he is in some ways fascimile of Saul Bellow’s Handerson. This search does not take him to the world of Africa but to the unseen mystic world of Benares and he gets fascinated by the obsolete world, decaying yet urbane--the world of Anuradha and Aftab and by the labyrinth of the haveli they inhabit. From here onwards, other identity-conflict begins, because of the physical longing or something that he hunts for in life. In a sense, from here onwards the second decay of the identity begins.

In the first place, he has a beautiful wife, having charm and beauty. Secondly, she is completely devoted to him. But despite all that, he longs for Anuradha. The longing for Anuradha is the second interesting point of the novel. Despite having a beautiful wife, his search continues for Anuradha. This is mystical to Som as well as to the reader. The protagonist of the novel, Som, himself fails to understand why this fascination towards the other woman. The question may be subjective in nature, but the answer to the question lies in the objective arena, in the unfulfilled desires in Freudian psychological terminology. The objectivity in the question is that his
fascination for the other world could be explained by establishing the
nature of his psychic needs. The longing for Anuradha is not a single
instance but there are a chain of his needs. First it is the headmaster’s
wife, then Geeta, followed by Leela Sabib and then there is Anuradha.

The sexual needs could be simply rejected because he rejected
Leela despite the fact that she gave him the sweet taste of the breast
and physical proximity. In this context, the explanation that Leela
failed to satisfy the intellectual quest of Som is worth noting. What
Leela gave was only the world of the matter and the world of the spirit
is a separate thing altogether. Som confirms: “Maybe, that was why we
fell apart. What I needed was something, somebody, somewhere in
which the two worlds combined” (Joshi, The Last 82).

The above-mentioned discourse is of paramount significance to
understand the inner identity-conflict of the protagonist. The discourse
visualises that the protagonist’s identity is torn apart because he was
not in need of the sexuality drive alone, but something beyond as well,
seemingly the spirituality. That is perhaps the reason that though he
loved to live in the inter-continental hotel, yet he was charmed by the
puzzling fascination of the decaying havelis of Benares. Som Bhaskar,
as the name itself suggests, was spiritually a void. It seems that like the
writer himself, the protagonist has renounced the larger world in favour
of the inner man and has engaged himself in the search for the essence
of the life, of human beingness. It gives authenticity to the statement of Edmund Fuller when he said that the “man suffers not only from the war, hunger, prosecution, famine and ruin but from inner problem--a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaningless in his way to existence” (Joshi, The Last 3).

Right from the start Som knows that he has become a nuisance and he has been fooling around “like a clown performing before a looking glass” (Joshi, The Last 82). The root cause of Som’s problem is that he has been relentlessly chased by the undefined hungers and is being haunted by the mysterious voices. His problem has not been aggravated by one factor alone. Primarily, it exists because of his awareness of the meaningless of life. Som is urged on by the keen interest to know the meaning of life but fails to make any headway in this regard. The world remains to him a mysterious world, as pretentious and meaningless as the holy bull’s of Banaras. His interest in the secrecy is genuine and he admits that what has interested him more than anything else in life is the secrecy of the universe. His 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 the world of spirit.

The reality about the identity and the inner identity-conflict of Som is that there is an interwoven web of scientific temperament with
rationality and the faith. It is known that the life’s riddle could be solved by unwavering trust in the world’s mechanisms. Som is not the type of person who would readily trust. He does not realise the value of genuine understanding and trust.

The inner conflict of the protagonist arises from his unlimited hunger to understand, the mystery of life and the mystery of the world. He has no faith and whatever he has faith in some of the realities of life, he wants to have the evidence for it. This search for the evidence and attempt to establish the causal effect between life and the meaning associated with that makes him a miserable man--torn apart inside and in the world. The life of Som is full of mystery. He does not know what he wants but he wants to understand the reality of life. The beginning and the end of life and birth and life belong to an area of faith and trust, without which the things gets more complicated. The same happens with Som. In search of reality, he navigates farther and farther and in the process gets farther from understanding the self.

The external conflict of the protagonist is a sum total of the social and cultural understanding of the circumstances that have prevailed upon the psyche of the protagonist in due course of time. The sensuality, sexuality, business, loss, profit, dominance in the business would have significance in life but these are not the only significant things in life. Rather the material world is incomplete if it does not
supplement the spiritual life of an individual. The spiritual void in the life of Som acts as a stimulant to the external factors for the fall of his identity and the identity conflict in his life of the protagonist from the beginning to the end of the novel.

He is haunted by a sense of futility, “the sorrow of the wasted life”. He realised that, in contrast to his father, he was not a good man: “I felt deep down, very deep down that not being a good man was not all right by me. I know that something was going to have to be done about the matter even though for the moment I did not know what that something exactly might be.” (Joshi, The Last 87).

The responsibility for the betrayal of his spirit, he knows, lay only on himself. The words of the Sheikh, uttered out of total darkness, provide him a light. He decides to retrieve his pawned soul by putting himself to use. Through the sorrow, humility and deep sense of guilt, Ratan Rathore finds his way out of the labyrinth.

The search for a meaning is more clearly marked in the protagonist of The Last Labyrinth. Som Bhasakar needs to be assured that all is well: “But I needed the trust--who doesn’t? I needed it all the more because I didn’t trust myself, or my men, or my fate, or the ceaseless travel on the social wheel” (Joshi, The Last 89).

He is very anxious to know what he wants. The desire to know the labyrinth, he seeks to overcome the hunger by possessing an object,
business enterprises, women. The psychologist whom he consults fails
to give him a solution to his problem, for, as one of them says to him:
“…psychiatry doesn’t allow certain approaches to problems like yours” (Joshi, The Last 87).

Bhasakr’s problem is essentially spiritual and remains outside
the scope of psycho-analysis. He can meet his wants and desires
through another soul, “when you meet the right soul then, of course,
things could be peaceful, may even move towards the higher goal”
(Joshi, The Last 74).

He believes for some time in the cure of Dr. Leela Sabin, a
professor trained in philosophy and an emancipator of women. But that
too, with the passage of time, vanishes.

In his search for a cure of relentlessness of identity, he meets
Gargi, the deaf mute daughter of the Sufi Pir who tells him that: “God
will send someone to help you…someone who has known suffering”
(Joshi, The Last 118). After Anuradha has left him, he feels dizzy and
off his balance. He takes the medicine for his fears but of no use. This
was to happen, because the agony and the suffering he is passing
through is marked by utmost helplessness, only external but internal as
well. For the cure, he needs internal satisfaction, identity-formation
and the meaning he can attach to his life. So, this case is the classical
conception of the fate of the life without meaning and the motive one
ascibe to life and the perception of life.

He feels shaken and the sense of dejavu leaves him numb. Deep
inside his heart, Bhaskar feels that he is a leper needing a cure but he
refuses to yield ground. Though he has sufficient ground for a leap of
faith, like Sarah of Graham Green’s The End of the Affair, his
scientific mind obstructs any such leap. He discards orthodox religion
as “half assed rigmarole” and “gimmick”. He is a man proud of his
education, working by logic, and a man without suffering and
humiliation which bring an understanding. Bhasakar needs the
evidence till the end. After the disappearances of Anuradha, when he
has a sense of nothing left, he prays for his forgiveness.

The long and tedious journey of Arun Joshi’s protagonists helps
them to arrive at some meaning. Som Bhaskar of The Last Labyrinth,
after a long and tiring search, seems to have arrived at a state of the
uncertainty. However, despite all his disillusionments and
uncertainties, Bhasakar’s only grip on life consists of his selfless,
disinterested love for Anuradha. He pays no heed either to his
crumbling business or to his lovely wife and his growing children. The
departed Anuradha becomes the core of his existence, the
crystallisation of the meaning of his life. His plea to her for plead in to
God if there is one, on his behalf is intensely lyrical.
The remarkable similarity of this cry to the numerous devotional songs, as also Som Bhasakar’s reference to saint Tukaram and to the body as the chariot of God, seem to point to a psychological context which might be the harbinger, a pilot escort of a higher faith. He has outlived the hunger of the body and of the mind, the state of the “I want, I want, I want” (Joshi, The Last 11). Like a true devotee, he is now unconcerned with the world as such. It seems that he has reached the end of his negotiations with the labyrinth of life and that only the Last Labyrinth, that of the death, remains to be gone through and he looks forward to it courageously. Even his antagonism seems to be lined with affirmations and with the possibility of the dawn of the faith.

The second connotation of the identity, identity establishment and the conflict in the formation of the identity is also reflected through the language of the dreams that Arun Joshi successfully crept into the novel.

Dreams in general are an important instance of free-functioning of the mind. Arun Joshi has used them adroitly not only to project the mind of Som Bhaskar, but also to set it against the logical and rational restraints of moral and social conventions. Basically, a man is a rational creature. Being a part of its social structure, Som does not find himself at home in its religious, social norms. He feels uprooted because he wants scientific evidence for everything. Frustrated within
himself, he finds this world alien. For him this world has no value, no
meaning or truth. He is not able to find the cause of the “First cause,”
that is, where and when the life began and where it would lead to. For
him, this life has become an eternal journey from nothingness to
nothingness, leading to an existential dilemma.

The unhampered working of his inner mind--what he feels above
love, life, death or what he wants to have in life--is explored through
the dreams which haunt him again and again. The dreams are a sort of
revolt against the logical and rational control of Som’s world.

For Freud, the dream is “parole” which can be understood only
against the background of the unique and private “langue” which is the
dreamer’s past and present and the events of his personal history and
changes. One can see Som involved in two worlds. Beyond the world
of his wife and children, there is a wider world (world of Aftab,
Anuradha and Gargi) which is disturbing him. His fears of death of
Aftab, his urge to possess Anuradha, the image of his mother in Gargi
are some of the recurrent features of his dreams. The dreams, full of
pain and disgust, are, to him, “a kind of punishment, something like
fatigue that soldiers are sentenced to” (Joshi, The Last 17).

The dreams are structured very systematically in the novel. The
first and the last parts of the novel contain two dreams. In the former,
the dreams are short and simple, but in the latter, the dreams are longer
and complex. “I dreamt” is the indicator of what follows in all of this dream-sequence, described in details except the dream occurring in the middle part of the novel. Despite the use of the past tense, the immediacy is enhanced by a sentence preceding the dream carrying the essential requirement of a dream, that is, sleep: “I fell asleep.” The dreams with introducing markers like “I dreamt” are narrated by Som for himself in order to evaluate his own conditions.

As a modern philosophic movement, “existentialism” deals with man’s disillusionment and despair. It originated in the philosophical and literary writings of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. M. H. Abrams, in his A Glossary of Literary Terms, defines it as a tendency to view each man as an isolated being who is cast ignominiously into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent human truth, value or meaning and to represent man’s life, as it moves from the nothingness which is both anguished and absurd.

Existentialism, in due course, developed into a powerful revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and the traditional ways in which earlier philosopher’s portrayed man. Man’s autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of
life are some of the themes reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism.

Som Bhaskar carries with him a sense of alienation, loneliness and pessimism, perceiving himself to be in a hostile world. The novel probes his turbulent inner world as a modern Hamlet whose problem is whether to become materialistic or spiritualistic.

Som, an industrialist, becomes a millionaire at the age of thirty. He is married “to an extra-ordinary woman” (Joshi, The Last 11) of his choice, who has borne him two children. He “goofed it all up” (Joshi, The Last 40) and is relentlessly driven by an indefinite hunger, as well as hunger for money, hunger for fame, hunger of the body and a hunger for some spiritual sublimity. He lives in a make-believe world of his own, alienated from the society about him.

At the beginning of the novel, Som realises that he has “become a nuisance” (Joshi, The Last 40) and has been fooling around “like a clown performing before a looking glass” (Joshi, The Last 10). A roaring hollowness inside his soul and “boredom and the fed-up-ness” (Joshi, The Last 21) torment him constantly. At the age of thirty-five, he has become “a worn-out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling” (Joshi, The Last 14). The base of Som’s problem is that he is constantly chased by undefined hunger. He is always haunted by mysterious voices: “audible only to my ear, a gray 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 beside my wife, within reach of the tranquillizers, I had sung the same strident song: I want. I want. I want. I want.” (Joshi, The Last 11).

All his life he has sung this song and been troubled. His trouble is multiplied not only because of “the terrible loneliness” (Joshi, The Last 23) of his heart but also because of his awareness of the lack of meaning in his life. Dr Birendra Pandey rightly observes: “He is torn by the inner contradictions and his consciousness wanders in a maze of opposite impulses. He suffers from an intense feeling of inadequacy, a feeling of rootlessness and a feeling of rudderless boat being tossed on turbulent waves” (Joshi, The Last 23).

Even in his school days he was upset by the futile activities of life and begged the Headmaster’s wife “to explain the meaning of it all” (Joshi, The Last 24). Later he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complications, “labyrinth within the labyrinth” (Joshi, The Last 29), like the lanes of Banaras. He calls life “vanity of vanities” (Joshi, The Last 32) which can be compared only to “meaningless flights of stairs” (Joshi, The Last 34) or “a fisherman’s net” (Joshi, The Last 37). To him, in life “Nothing was straightforward. One was always running a hurdles race.” (Joshi, The Last 133).
With such a grim experience of life, he develops “a new loathing for the squalid world” (Joshi, The Last 46). He is disgusted with himself and other people. Consequently, he says, “It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without.” (Joshi, The Last 47). He is suffocated by such voids.

His way of being engaged in keeping the minute book signifies his confrontation with the self, and helps, up to the threat of madness. Furthermore, the minute book, like his life, is unorganised and inconclusive, ending where it has begun.

Som rushes about in search of happiness and meaningfulness. “How happy I must be” he explains, “to have no problem in life” (Joshi, The Last 98). But life is teeming with troubles and pains, which are all the more keenly felt by sensitive people.

The question about life and death haunts Som throughout his life. Like his father, he is vexed by the thought of death: “…there was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death” (Joshi, The Last 15). He wants to know its secret.

The novel centres on Som’s confrontation with the darkness of death and the void in Lal-Haveli where he has gone to buy Aftab’s shares. Lal Haveli is as mysterious as the mythical world of Bhills encountered by Billy Biswas in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas.
Som is endowed with a highly intellectual and scientific mind, which is constantly caught up in a maelstrom of ideas, values, issues of philosophy and metaphysics and is troubled by it. Indira Bhutt and Suja Alexander succinctly sum up: “Som is like Abhimanyu in The Mahabharata who is not able to come out of “chakravyuva”. Bhaskar loses himself in the chakravyuva of life and death, reality and truth, doubt and faith.” (70).

He finds himself groping through the labyrinth of life and death. Hence, according to Usha Bande, “Like T.S. Eliot’s hollow man, Som is afraid to face reality, whether of life or death. The situation is like that of Dante’s Limbo the realm of nothingness where he is trapped.” (156).

Som cannot find any satisfactory answer to his questions, doubts and inner voices. He gets mentally shattered, morally degenerated and physically exhausted with dreams and insomnia.

His quest for life’s secret becomes hopelessly complicated because of his yearning to have the best of both the worlds--the world of matter and of spirit. His desires know no satisfaction. Desiring the impossible, he remarks: “What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined” (Joshi, The Last 82).
He is “afraid of death” (Joshi, The Last 74) and tries in vain to escape his fear through sex in the arms of Anuradha, Aftab’s wife. He seems to hear only the language of sex, and in each of the women he encounters he finds a different quality to meet a different need.

In his wife Geeta he finds a trust--“if discontent is my trade-mark, trust is Geeta’s” (Joshi, The Last 63)--that is reassuring, and in Leela Sabnis, a philosophy professor, a fulfilment of his urge for freedom. Leela, with her analytical mind, tries to reason with him and make him face up to reality. He enjoys her chatter, revels in it, but her prescription does not seem to help him as it implies the separation of the world of matter from that of the spirit. So, he turns to Anuradha, his “Shakti” (Joshi, The Last 24), but she, too, fails to understand him. She tells him: “You don’t know what you want. You don’t know what is wrong and you don’t know what you want” (Joshi, The Last 106).

Frustrated by his failure to win Anuradha, Som goes to Europe with his wife Geeta, hoping to overcome his obsession. He is, however, unable to forget Anuradha and his mounting passion for her makes him impotent, making Geeta miserable. He cuts short his holiday and rushes back to India. K. M. Chander points out Som’s discontented state of mind. According to him, “Som was a kind of modern ‘Trishanku’ belonging neither here nor there” (58).
Som’s approach to life is somewhat close to the scientific methods of experimentation and validation. With this approach, however, he does not get anywhere near the secret of life. In his depression, 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” (Joshi, The Last 164) that is all he wants for he is mercilessly torn apart by his doubts.

Som is eaten up by his own “strange mad thoughts” (Joshi, The Last 223) and incapable of paying adequate heed to the world and its normal demands. His flourishing business is reduced to “a big mess” (Joshi, The Last 223).

Finally, he tries to commit suicide. Verma tries to give the rationale for it: ‘His unbridled sensuality and individual pride lead him only to despair and meaninglessness in life, and hence to the impulsive decision to commit suicide.’ When he tries to kill himself, he is stopped by Geeta. One is made to believe that the unquestioning trust of his intelligent and understanding wife will restore peace to his life.

Among the Indian novelists handling Stream of Consciousness technique, Arun Joshi occupies a significant position. Chiefly concerned with the depiction of psychological reality, he can be called a novelist of the inner world. He prefers the private to the public. In his
novels, he explores the inner reality of his protagonists. Since Joshi dealt with various levels of consciousness of his characters, he found the technique used by James Joyce, Virginia Wolf, D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner and Dorothy Richardson quite suitable for the purpose of his character delineation. Hence, one finds the use of flashbacks, and Stream of Consciousness technique in his all five novels.

Joshi’s novel The Last Labyrinth represents an image of contemporary man’s agonised consciousness contending with the threat of insanity. The novel probes into the turbulent inner world of the protagonist, Som Bhaskar.

In The Last Labyrinth Bombay is represented in contrast to Varanasi. Pragmatism versus faith becomes the crux of the issue. The love-story of the rich businessman Som Bhaskar and the mysteriously fascinating Anuradha symbolically alludes to the two extremely different natures of the two Indian cities. No final judgment is expressed at the open end of the novel, although the author declares the impossibility of the two extremes to coexist.

The Last Labyrinth, thus, delineates the existential despair in the psyche of its neurotic protagonist Som Bhasker.