CHAPTER - V

THE LAST LABYRINTH: CHOICE AS RENUNCIATION
The Last Labyrinth: Choice as Renunciation

The Last Labyrinth presents a startling picture of an empiricist who is compelled to look into his self, an ineluctable thing for the empiricist methodology. Som's predicament is more a result of his orientation. Som's cry 'I want, I want' is not one of despair but a craving for a different apparatus to understand the self. At the beginning of the novel we find a desperate Som who has exhausted all his empirical methods to look into his 'self' without much success. But his rationalistic orientation prevents him from accepting the existence of a parallel reason without empirical evidence. He fails to see the need to discard this splintered apparatus, hence he looks at everything through this apparatus, thereby everything appears as hap-hazard and further complicates his inability to comprehend. An awareness of this inability fills him with fear and a sense of estrangement. This also deprives him of the possibility of discerning the existence of choice that would enable him to look into his 'self' and fill the voids that are present. Whenever Som reflects, the word Void invariably appears, so as to make it not just a linguistic sign but a profound symbol.
The novel, *The Last Labyrinth*, opens with a long introspection by the convalescent Som. The point of view is that of a first person narrative. The impact made on his life and psyche are so deep that he'd like to view his past life with the perspective provided by Anuradha. Som who ridicules his father for talking about the first cause finds his empiricist view shattered by Anuradha. She snaps at Som when he ridicules her story of Gargi's father being a Sufipir, restoring Aftab's eyesight. She tells him:

> I do not know about what. 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.¹

Only the presence of Anuradha makes it possible for Som to survive the stroke and look at life with far more equanimity and a recognised presence of mystery. If Som is a creature of empiricist methodology, Anuradha belongs to the Religion of Faith that has swayed the minds over the centuries. The clash between the two results in the triumph of 'Faith' in

life. Arun Joshi makes a positive use of Labyrinth as the symbol to emphasise this point.

Labyrinth as symbol has been used with a negative connotation by the Western writers. For them the labyrinth contains the monster Minotaur who ultimately devours the hero or destroys him. The story about labyrinth and Minotaur can be tracked to a Cretan myth. Minos, the king of Crete, had a beautiful wife who fell in love with Jove in the manifestation of bull and conceives and gives birth to a monstrous creature. This creature is given the name Minotaur. The King, to hide this shame, orders the construction of a labyrinthine structure and keeps the Minotaur there. He proclaims to the world that he is prepared to give his daughter and one half of his kingdom to anyone who enters the labyrinth and kills the monster. Many heroes are devoured by the Labyrinth. At last, Theseus, with the help of Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, enters the labyrinth and kills the Minotaur. The myth of Minotaur has been glorified in Western literature. The significance of Labyrinth as an image has been undergoing a change. The emphasis is shifted to the self from its original reference to the triumph of a hero. For Borges, Labyrinth is a prison and Self is
imprisoned. In the interpretative history of the myth, Theseus has stolen march over the Minotaur. But the Borgesian deconstruction deglamorizes the hero's triumph. Cast in the form of a monologue, the House of Asterion focusses the attention of the reader on Asterion who seems to deserve his sympathy.

'I don't know who they are, but I know that one of them prophesied, at the moment of his death, that someday my redeemer would come. Since then my loneliness does not pain me, because I know my redeemer lives and he will finally rise above the dust.'

It is only towards the end of the tale that the reader becomes aware of the profound implications of the tale when Theseus tells Ariadne that "The Minotaur scarcely defended himself." If Borges deconstruction of cretan Myth brings out the essential loneliness of man and the pitiable nature of man's existence, Joshi brings out Som's inability to overcome empiricism and come to terms with Anuradha, thereby aggravates his anguish. Joshi also makes use of the labyrinth to dramatize a similar experience in the Eastern

affirmative sense. Joshi's Labyrinth is Anuradha who is life giving. It has no lurking Minotaur deep down to devour the venturing hero.

Anuradha first meets Som at a party given by Aftab at an Intercontinental Hotel in Delhi. When he sees Anuradha, with Mehandi on her hands, his mind races back to his school days, reminding him of the wife of the Headmaster who consoled him after his mother's death. He ignores the attempts of the wife of the headmaster to console him and allows his thoughts travel to her shapely figure with a fine pair of bulging breasts. She releases in him for the first time the inexplicable erotic energy. This is quite similar to that of Billy when he consumes native brew and makes love to Bilasia. He tells Romi:

he feels as if for the first time he is overpowered by 'desire' whose intensity is beyond description and understanding.\(^3\)

It is this kind of fierce energy coupled with an extreme confidence in his own abilities drives Som to acquire Aftab's company. It is only Anuradha who is aware

\(^3\)Arun Joshi: The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, (Delhi, Hind Pocket Books, 1971), p. 142.
of this power in Som and rejects the idea that Som's buying up Aftab's company to expand his business. She senses something else. She senses his fierce desire to possess her and take her away from Aftab. Som is certain that Anuradha would be his, after buying up Aftab's company. She is not ready to accept Som's methods. She says:

    I'll come to Bombay, if you do not mind the gossip.

She makes it clear to Som that she is not married to Aftab. She says, if Aftab believes that way, it is "one of Aftab's little make - beliefs: That's all you have your own." Anuradha's readiness to go with Som surprises him. He cannot understand the fact that love need not culminate in marriage. Anuradha speaking of her relations with Aftab tells Som:

    "Of course not. I just live with him".

Som feels that 'it is a pity that she should be nobody's

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4. The Last Labyrinth, p. 137.
5. Ibid., p. 44.
6. Ibid., p. 73.
wife. This is the beginning of mystery about Anuradha. Som reflects on his confusion when Anuradha spoke to him:

"It is better not to be anybody's wife'. She said as if reading my thoughts. She had a way, I discovered later, of commenting on things you had yet to put into words'. You can't marry everyone you love. So why marry any one at all." Som is surprised to find Aftab influenced greatly by Anuradha. When Som tells Aftab of his shares

'but you do worry about shares don't you', Aftab replies

'Yes, but that is because it concerns Anuradha. She is so keen to have me succeed'. Som then says:

'She wants you to be an industrialist?' Aftab replies 'I do not know.' It is just that she can't stand to see anybody fail. It breaks her heart. So, here I am, stuck with this industry and she wants me to some how pull through'.

7The Last Labyrinth, p. 73.
8Ibid., p. 43.
9Ibid., p. 43
10Ibid., p. 39.
From the beginning Som is attracted to Anuradha. At Delhi, near the dargah, he allows her to touch him. She appears to sublimate Som's erotic energy. He cannot help looking at her with desire to possess. At the same time he knows that his desire for her is not the usual 'it was just for once' kind. On his first visit to Lal Haveli, he sits by her side waiting for Aftab's arrival. When Som bends forward to light her cigarette, he observes: "She leaned sideways reaching for a box. It was made of silver and looked like a Paandan. She opened it and took out a cigarette. As I bent forward to light it for her I noticed how well her 'Choli' fitted her. A very fine gold chain glowed around her throat and on her chest and disappeared between the full breasts. If she was aware of my gaze she took no notice of it."¹¹

During Som's first visit to Haveli, he is taken to Gargi. As it was late in the night, Aftab asks Som to stay back with him in the haveli. Som is entertained to a song and dance performance. Som feels as if Anuradha has cast a spell on him. When Som is shown his room to rest for the night, Som's desire to possess her burns inside him with

¹¹ The Last Labyrinth, p. 43.
feverish intensity. At the same time he appears to be overawed by something he recognises in Anuradha, Som reflects:

It was as though she had been 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. And it was as though the vision always left her sadder, taking away from her hope and the laughter with which she had been born. I knew I wanted her.¹²

Anuradha's relations with Som are coloured by a sense of detachment on her part. She knows that Som does not need her. She feels that he is looking for something that's possible only through her. Anuradha tells Som, "It is not me you want," she said quietly. Som asks her "How do you know?" She replies '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."¹³

But Som desperately needs her to get an answer to his obsessive and crazy quest 'I want, I want'. We are

¹²*The Last Labyrinth*, p. 58.

¹³Ibid., pp 58-9.
not sure whether Anuradha succeeds in providing solace to Som's anguish, but without her it is difficult to imagine, Som would have been saved after the attack when Dr. 'K' has given him up as 'clinically dead'. She also warns Som to get away from Lal Haveli to escape death at the hands of Aftab before she disappears. In her presence Som feels that against his will, he is being 'drawn helplessly into the labyrinth of their mysterious world'.

From the foregoing analysis of the relationship between Som and Anuradha we can further explore the signification of the labyrinth image in the novel. Unlike the signification it has in the Greek Myth, the image of labyrinth in Joshi's novel earns affirmative specification.

For the sake of clarity of the argument we must go back to Som's first visit to Lal Haveli. Som and Aftab go thro' Lal Haveli. Aftab begins to talk,

'We wandered leisurely back through the building.
'Did I tell you it is built like a labyrinth, this haveli' 15

You did. But why?
"My ancestors baffled their enemies this. There are

14 The Last Labyrinth, p. 60.

15 Ibid., p. 36.
rooms with in rooms, corridors that only bring you back to where you started."
"I noticed that. Can you really lose your way?"
Of course. There are rooms where you could lock a man up and he would never be found. No one would hear his cry." 
"And what is in last labyrinth?"
"In the last labyrinth".
"Yes'.
"Why, death of course," I looked at him, puzzled."16

If Death is inside the last labyrinth we may safely conclude that the first labyrinth is 'birth'. Just as the hero in the Greek Myth has to kill the Minotaur to get out of the labyrinth, in the last labyrinth the hero has to experience death before he can earn an awareness of life. A close look at the text makes us see that the 'death motif' is a recurring feature in the novel. Gargi visits Lal Haveli to comfort Aftab who has taken ill. Soor wants to know from her how he could get over his restlessness. Soor speaks to Gargi, 'I am fed up of this restlessness'. I shot out suddenly. "So absolutely fed up. Can you help me." Gargi appears to be touched by his anguish and writes on her slim pad.

16 The Last Labyrinth, p. 37.
'God will send some one to help you' - 17

Som wants to know who that person could be Gargi writes again.

'Someone who has known suffering.' 18

Som decides to get back to the hotel. Anuradha insists that he should stay back and rest at the haveli for the night. Som sulks and shows his irritation because he feels inadequate in Anuradha's presence. Som reflects

'Faced with her, in the loneliness of that haveli, I realised how inadequate. I was to deal with her. Even for this I blamed her. It was silly.' 19 Watching Som flare up, Gargi, watching him with amusement writes a note on her pad: "Go with her," it said. "Don't quarrel. She is your Shakti." 20 This may be interpreted as Anuradha as the saviour, shakti in its benign and smiling manifestation.

Som reflects after this. He is puzzled to make sense out of Gargi's writing. Som soon realises that

17 The Last Labyrinth, p. 118.
18 Ibid., p. 118.
19 Ibid., p. 121.
20 Ibid., p. 121.
Anuradha has become indispensable to him and his visits to haveli become more frequent. The more he meets Anuradha, the more he desires her. Som reflects:

"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. Beyond that room lay the silent labyrinth through which too, before the invisible audience of Aftab and Azizun and Tarakki, I sometimes walked. By myself or with Anuradha, hand in hand. And always in various shades of coherence, the spoken or unspoken question, like a vulture, circled the corpse of my life: What lay in the last labyrinth?"\(^{21}\)

In this passage the image of corpse suggests Som's feeling that whenever he went he could see only voids. He experiences not metaphoric death but death itself. This brings about a crisis in the complex relation that exists between him and Anuradha. In Som's voids we hear only the cynical cry 'I want, I want'. In the life sustaining labyrinths associated with Gargi and Anuradha we listen to the opulent whisper 'I give, I give'. It is in this sense Anuradha is a giver of life which literally brings Som's corpse to life. For accomplishing this miracle, the choice

\(^{21}\textit{The Last Labyrinth, p. 122.}\)
lies not with Som but with Anuradha. She has to make the choice and the choice is giving up Som. It is not a negative act but a positive and rejuvenating one. A similar situation is dramatised in Greene's "The End of the Affair."

Like "The End of the Affair", the Last Labyrinth explores the intensely personal view of faith in terms of possession and release. In the Last Labyrinth we find a conflict between the faith in miracle inhering the image of Krishna, Sakthi and Srichakra as exemplified in Gargi and Anuradha and Som's obsessive and crazy quest 'I want, I want'.

Unlike "the End of the Affair" The Last Labyrinth presents a character in whom there is a conflict generated by the failure of quest to see beyond Reason in empirical terms. Like in Greene's novels, the person who brings about a miracle, in the shape of restoring Som from virtual death, is an illegitimate child, her mother though a devotee of Krishna was a prostitute. Dr.Kashyap gives a few details about Anuradha who has a strange aura of the sacred and the profane. She herself narrates her story to Som when they were holidaying in a mountain resort. She is the daughter...
of disreputable woman who was stabbed by one of her lovers with a broken whisky bottle. She changes her name from Meera to Anuradha. She is brought up by her aunt in Bombay where she becomes a filmstar. She leaves the profession with the help of Aftab and lives with him in his haveli in Benares. She lives with Aftab and develops a relationship of love and esteem towards Gargi who acts as a spiritual guide to Aftab. Whatever her antecedents may be, she appears to be a strange woman, at once young and old, ancient and modern, demoniac in her lust and divine in her love. She is everyman's woman and no man's wife. Her permissiveness in accepting Aftab and Som together is startling from the existing social mores. When Som tells Anuradha that they should run away, she says:

"Men like you don't run away"
"I'll come to Bombay, if you don't mind the gossip"\textsuperscript{22}

After Som's stroke, Anuradha wrote to Geeta asking for her forgiveness. Geeta tells Som,

"She wrote to say that I should forgive her and I should not mind she said she had gone

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{The Last Labyrinth}, p. 127.
along with you because you had wanted it but it was not her, she said, that you really wanted." 23

At the Guest-House near the hills, Anuradha tells Som,

"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." 24

Som's desperate desire to possess Anuradha is similar to that of Bendrix who wants to possess Sarah through her body. Similarly like Sarah, Anuradha trusts Som and Aftab without reservations. Like Bendrix who hates Henry and holds him in low esteem, Som also holds Aftab in low esteem and expects Anuradha to leave Aftab and be loyal to him. Recovering from the stroke, during that period when Som comes to know that Geete knows all about him and Anuradha, he begins to hate her equanimity and poise. In the End of the affair also we find Bendrix develop a positive dislike for Henry because Sarah was loyal to him. Like Bendrix, Som also feels that

23 The Last Labyrinth, p. 147.

24 Ibid., p. 128.
he is being abandoned by Anuradha. Som cannot reconcile himself to the fact that Anuradha is clinging to Aftab even after his overtures. Like Sarah, the unbearable logic of Anuradha’s attitude towards the whole affair is firmly rooted in her capacity to respond to moments that bring a sense of happiness. But Som appears to be a psychological case. All men are jealous but Som is obsessed with jealousy. When Anuradha abandons Som to make him happy, we find her, like Sarah, achieve a mastery of her ego. Sarah, a non-conformist, kneels in prayer when she finds Bendrix lying unconscious under a heavy door after a bomb blast, and promises God that she would give up Bendrix provided God give him life. Anuradha renounces her relationship with Som, the only difference between the two is Anuradha’s faith in God. She is prepared to give up Som, if Som were to be restored to life after the fatal stroke. Greene prefaces The End of the Affair with the following quotation from Leon Bloy: "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist and into them enters suffering in order that they may exist." No man knows what he is or what he is capable of. Only moments of crisis can penetrate the habit-ridden mind and produce the
urge to explore the nature of existence. This is also 
true of Joshi's the Last Labyrinth.

The foregoing comparison of the 'Last Labyrinth' with 
the End of the Affair, suggests that in both the novels renun-
ciation results in rejuvenation in the sense that Som and 
Bendrix who were virtually dead are given a new lease of life.
It may appear as a miracle to a scientifically oriented person, 
as it in fact appeared to Dr. Kashyap, Som's physician and friend.
But to Anuradha whom we see through the transparent conscious-
ness of Som it is not a miracle. It is an affirmation of the 
choice of the self. She gives up what she likes in order to 
save it. We may call this a leap, in the existential sense, 
into the self so that leaping into the faith, Anuradha not 
only saves Som but saves herself. The faith that directs and 
clinches Anuradha's choice stems from Gargi who fuses in her-
self the positive and negative aspects of maya which is sugges-
ted by the metaphor and the title 'Labyrinth'. Maya can be 
viewed as labyrinth in the sense that the self may get lost 
in it. It also suggests that maya has in itself the efficacy 
to help the self to place itself in focus with the higher

Graham Greene, The End of the Affair (London, Bodley 
self. The Last Labyrinth in a subtle way, fuses the symbols we have been just discussing and the fusion is very well exemplified in Anuradha, whose renunciatory choice is at the centre of the novel.