Chapter 3

Exile's Return

In The Apprentice too Arun Joshi continues his engagement with the theme of alienation and dispossession. His treatment of theme of alienation and dispossession in this novel, however, indicates a different dimension and direction. In the earlier two novels, The Foreigner and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, we have noticed that the sense of alienation in the protagonists is initiated and intensified because of either some mystical urge as manifested in the character of Billy Biswas or because of an acute awareness of the self being continually threatened by the murderous antagonistic socio-cultural forces and materialist drive of underscored by Sindi. Given to sheer materialistic achievements and hedonistic pleasures, Sindi's society revels in Godlessness and valuelessness. Its shallowness and crass indifferences to the integrity of character and essentials of genuine human existence continually tortures and torments Sindi. He therefore, keeps on searching desperately from person to person and place to place for some sustaining foothold. He is, in fact, reduced to 'a nowhere man' or a foreigner wherever he goes or whatever he does. His endless endeavours finally reveal it to him that return and reconciliation alone is the solitary source of redemption. Both Sindi and Billy feel claustrophobic and suffocated, anguished and agonised. Dispossessed of their genuine selves, they strive to escape from their society. In The Apprentice, however, the situation is reversed. It is Ratan's intense desire for social achievements, name, fame, power,
position and status that propels him into the narcissistic and materialistic society. And ultimately Ratan feels alienated in a crowd that is essentially lonely. Surrounded by faceless people Ratan feels himself exiled and dispossessed.

The novel has received considerable critical attention; it has been approached and analyzed from various angles like social, moral, and psychological and also from the angle of dissidence and defiance. The Apprentice has also been juxtaposed with the works of Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and William Golding in terms of the ‘irreparable injury’ inflicted on the ‘moral nature of man’ by an ‘act of treachery’ (1).

D.R.Sharma observes The Apprentice: “as study of the loss and the retrieval of one’s soul” (2). Das, estimate of Ratan as a man who has “at the core of his higher self... an impassioned faith in the dignity of man, the holiness of feelings” (3). R.K.Dhawan finds in Ratan “neither a rebel nor a dissident” but a “victim” (4). Thakur Guruprasad sees a “tragic flaw” in his “fear of failure” (5).

The Apprentice is about a dark crisis in the human soul. It depicts the anguished attempt of a guilt-stricken individual to retrieve his innocence and honour. It contains a severe criticism of the society that constantly poses a threat to human dignity and his moral stature. Oblivious of the divine dimensions of human existence, moral values and tender human conditions, the society demands unconditional allegiance
and affirmation. This sort of allegiance naturally bereaves one of his genuine self and individual identities. Sindi Oberoi and Billy Biswas therefore, refused to compromise with the world and consequently suffer from an acute sense of alienation and dispossession. But Ratan Rathore’s problems of alienation and dispossession are incorporated and presented in altogether a different way. He dreams of achieving material success and in the process he himself is victimised by the malevolent social forces. It takes him whole life to realize the futility of everything. He experiences the pangs generated by the civilization that is essentially characterized by lust, self-centeredness and crass sexuality. His mother, ironically, had warned him of the myriad importance of money in life. A man without money she believed was as worthless as a beggar’s shoe, even worse.

The novel is a confessional monologue told to a young college student. Ratan tells his student listener a national cadet – who spends three months in Delhi to rehearse for the NCC parade on the Republic Day. The novel is told through the reflections of a man looking back on his past. In the retrospective account of his life, Ratan seeks to trace out the roots of his inner sickness and the reasons behind his fall from innocence, which gives the novel at once its form and meaning. The novel concentrates on the central character and his internal struggles. The action of the novel takes the form of a quest. The protagonist, Ratan, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, and Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Albert Camus’ The Fall, button holes an ordinary middle class auditor and
arouses his interest about his spiritual trials – in Ratan’s case about why he calls himself an ‘apprentice’. In the course of his monologue, Ratan reveals his hypocrisy, cowardice, corruption, debauchery and finally his great betrayal. The details of his self-revelation are important. The novel mirrors the moral crisis not only of an individual but also of the entire society. Ratan, calls himself ‘a man of our times’; Arun Joshi too calls him ‘Everyman’ (6).

In Arun Joshi’s first four novels we find confessional note of narration; but in The Apprentice confession alone is the protagonist’s central concern. As Thakur Guruprasad remarks: “the narrator in this novel is an insistent confessionalist, confession is a factor in his redemption”, (7) Disorder in the inner world of Ratan Rathor and his quest for an order irrespective of any external force, leads him to an intense self-examination. The Apprentice extends the modes and means of the confessional narrative. The irresistible yearnings of intrinsic existence and restrictive extrinsic pressures force the protagonist to take a leap in the fathomless depth of the self. The intense desire of Ratan to regain his innocence and purity of the heart that appears to have been irretrievably lost in the mirage of materialistic achievements and consequential inner chaos and confusion lead him to relentless self-analysis. His seduction, betrayal and helpless surrender to the cultural forces ignite his moral consciousness. Confessional mode, as many critics fail to understanding, is the intrinsic textual necessity and adds to the aesthetic dimensions and multiple possibilities of the text. Because a
confessional text essentially is an exploration of a guilt-stricken consciousness and the forces that lead to confession as well as the relevance of confession to the tormented and confused protagonist are the major concerns of modern confessional novel.

In his confession Ratan, therefore, refers to an incident in his childhood. It was the death of his patriotic father who sacrificed his life for the independence of his country. A successful lawyer, he came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. He gave up his successful legal practice and joined the freedom struggle. He overlooked his ailing tubercular wife and the future of his only son. Ratan Rathor is the child of double inheritance - the patriotic and ideal world of his father and worldly wisdom of his mother. Initially he is more inclined towards his father's ideals. At the end of his educational career, he decides to join the army of Subhash Chandra Bose. But his mother who had a down-to-earth realism wanted him to earn money by fair or foul means. Her views about money need to be understood in the textual context. Primarily because she exercises a noticeable influence on the attitudes and outlooks of her son. Her ideas about money and material comforts also demand critical attention as she appears to unmistakably emblematise the zeitgeist, the fascination and prominence money enjoys in the modern world. It is, in fact, considered as sine qua non, a solitary source of success and satisfaction, happiness and contentment. She therefore, advises her son:
"Don’t fool yourself, son... Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money" (P-19)

A modern mind, his mother is alert to the demands of her time to lead a cosy, comfortable and successful life with a conspicuous social status. Realization of success and status, she strongly believes is simply impossible without money. She does not want her son to a victim of idealism or abstract ethereal concerns. She knows the chemistry of her son too well to let him fall a prey to shallow morality or honesty. She knows that his father’s patriotism and his willingness to sacrifice money and materialistic comforts for the sake of certain patriotic or moral idealism. She ruthlessly warns him:

"It was not patriotism but money - that brought respect and bought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws - but money was law unto itself" (P-19).

Ratan is caught in the dilemma of these two contradictory values, and philosophies - one held by his father another by his mother.

Ratan has two distinct incidents in his memory, one of his father’s martyrdom and another friend Brigadier’s courage when he saved him from hooligan. His father was leading a procession against the British.
The police lathi charged and used tear-gas to disperse the crowd. Ratan’s father walked towards police defying the order. He was shot in the chest by the police. That moment of heroic courage and self-sacrifice was frozen in Ratan’s memory: “as a moment of great silence” (P-12). Ratan is greatly touched by these two events early in his life. He wants to live a life of his father and his true friend Brigadier before he plunges into a life of lying, hypocrisy, graft and carnality.

Early in the novel, Ratan thinks of following his father’s example. He holds ideals of his father above everything else. Inspired by his father’s unflinching commitment, his acute sense of social and moral responsibility. Ratan too wants to chalk out life’s itinerary in the twilight of his father’s dreams and desires. But the world around him is dissolute and deviated. It is a world of licentiousness and socio-political exploitation. Consequently, his sense of self-extension makes him hold himself responsible for the atrocities committed by the British.

“Month after month young men were sucked into the turbulence – to be imprisoned or shot down, or disappear underground. Every now and then someone I knew was imprisoned, maimed or killed and for days afterwards I felt burdened as though in some way I had been responsible for the killing” (P-19-20).
Ratan wanted to be something different: “To be good! Respected! To be of use!” (p-18). Like his father, he also wanted to make a mark upon the world. But soon his hopes were belied, dreams shattered and idealism dissipated. Soon people forgot the ideals and values of the martyrs like his father who sacrificed their lives. Sacrifice now was replaced by self-interest, courage and honesty were by cowardice and deception, and ideals by deals. Moreover Ratan does not have the courage of his father – his stunning awareness of the prevailing reality that is governed by laxity and self-aggrandizement, makes him take recourse to cautiousness and cowardice. He does not have the courage to implement the ideals of his father. C.N.Srinath rightly considers The Apprentice:

“a tale of a conscience-torn man... with a deep awareness of the conflicts between life and living” (8).

After the death of his father, Ratan starts his futile exercise of job-hunting in an alien city. He soon realises that to be the son of a martyr is of no earthly use in getting a job. The harsh reality of his father’s leaving behind him a cynical widow and her illness and plenty of patriotic fervour and precious little funds shatter his ego. He is let down by well-wishers and cut off by acquaintances. In a tone of self-mockery Ratan describes that period: “What hopes we start out in! Beggars in princes’ garb. Heads bursting with dreams” (P-23). Bullied and mocked, he visits office after office to be: examined, interviewed, interrogated and rejected” (P-29). He meets frustration everywhere. He is disappointed and disheartened. In search for a job his: “back had nearly been broken by the
world’s unjust thrashing” (P-42) the world appears to him: as a bundle of mirrors, tempting and somehow held together but on the brink always of falling apart” (P-17). We find Ratan slowly loosing his hope. He tells his Listener: “there is nothing in the world as sad as the end of hope. Not even death” (P-25). His faith in higher values, humanity and sympathy is broken. He comes to know that disorder, hypocrisy and brutality are order of the modern society. When Ratan comes to face this world, he is:

“stuck dumb by its other face, the absurd servility, with which it was willing to turn about and worship the very men whom it had earlier thought nothing of annihilating” (P-42).

He is disillusioned by the breakdown of faith as he bemoans:

“What hurts is the collapse of the faith that they destroy. You believe there is justice in the world. You go about the world for fifty years, this belief sitting in your heart. Then something happens and you go seeking justice. And justice is just not there. Or, you assume your wife is faithful, your children love you, your boss fair or that God exists. And then, someday proof comes along that nothing is so. This is what hurts” (P-23).

Ratan soon learns the ways of the world:
"I had added a new dimension to my life. I had become, at
the age of twenty-one, hypocrite and a liar, in short, a
sham" (P-27).

That in fact, is the beginning of his alienation. His moral cowardice is
followed by dispossession - a loss of identity, self-dignity and integrity.

In spite of a feeling of alienation and dispossession, Ratan, unlike
Billy Biswas, slowly adapts himself to it. He gets job of a temporary clerk
in the department of war-purchases with the help of a fellow-dweller.
This gives a new turn to his life. He devotes thus him self completely to
the advancement of his career and got himself submerged into the world
that goes contradictory to his father's ideals and his own inner yearning.
What is more important to be noted here ironically is that he justifies his
stance. He regards himself to be more worthy of deserving the places
and positions. He considers himself better than his friends:

"in education, intelligent, cultured, and it was my right that
I should rise in life, to levels higher than the others aspired
for" (P-31).

Ratan learns the importance of sycophancy. It is this quality which
makes him successful. He becomes expert in obedience, servility, flattery
and cunningness. Ratan confesses frankly:
“some survive through defiance, others through ability.  
Still others through obedience, by becoming servants to the  
powers of the world” (P-33).

His colleagues call him “a whore”, “an upstart”, but he does not care any more. He is out and out a man of the world now, thoroughly possessed by the social and cultural drives – totally alienated from and dispossessed of his genuine self, of sincerity of existence and purity of intention. He admits without any moral inhibition:

“I am a thick-skin now, a thick-skin and a washout but, believe me, my friend, and I too have had thoughts such as these. But what was to be done? One had to live. And to live, one had to make a living. And, how was a living to be made except through careers” (P-39).

Billy Biswas was dispossessed and alienated from the civilized society due to his non-conformity and spirit of rebellion. Sindi Oberoi suffered from alienation and dispossession because of his withdrawal from the ineluctable problems of life and living. But in Ratan’s case, conformity to the counterfeit values of a corrupt society results in his alienation and dispossession not only from those around him but also from his true, authentic self. It is interesting to note here that Ratan is fully aware of the digressions and deviations in his life. In fact, he exercises his freedom of choice. Ironically, however, his acute awareness of his own moral deviation and spiritual disintegration worsens his
plight. He knows that his inner self has developed, what Wilhelm Reich calls in another sense armour', against all that is good, tender and divine. It is armour that has hidden his organic, original and authentic self. Ratan turns into a man of ambition:

"I felt as though some tender surface beneath my skin was congealing, hardening into cartilage and bone, forming the shell against which all future messages, advice or recrimination, well-meaning or foolish, would merely bounce off, leaving me untouched, free to pursue my ends without distraction" (P-49).

Billy was a rebel, Ratan Rathor becomes the victim of the deceitful society that drives him to make a compromise with it. He realizes that;

"it is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe: it is DEALS. DEALS" (P-48).

His marriage with the niece of the Superintendent is one such deal:

"In his own inimitable way he had set the equations. If I married his niece I would stay in job; he would see to that. If I didn't he could not possibly be expected to help, which was as good as being thrown out" (P-46).

Ratan marries the niece of Superintendent and his job is confirmed and later upgraded as an officer with a dozen clerks working under him.
Now he is fully convinced that the world runs on the basis of deals. The marriage marks a turning point in his life. The initial qualms he feels about degrading marriage to the level of a 'deal' and his subsequent consent to it show that with his new understanding of deals he has indeed become a fit officer in a system that has come to respect 'deals'. Ratan becomes more acceptable to the establishment by gaining the additional qualifications of thick skinned indifference to other people's opinions and conscious effort not to take things to heart. He soon becomes quite proficient in adjusting to everything and in concealing his true feelings from everyone. During the war he becomes conspicuously patriotic. He not only gives many generous donations to the war-front but suddenly becomes a very conscientious citizen. He makes everyone work extra time as part of the war effort, takes his duties very seriously, and becomes very vocal about his love for his mother-land at informal parties and formal meetings. He particularly enjoys talking about his willingness to be deputed to any dangerous assignment as a service to the motherland; he often asserts, more important to him than his own life. He emerges as the most willing and enthusiastic donor of blood in his locality and when no newspaper publishes his pedantic article on the fall of moral standards in post-independence India, he gets copies of it cyclostyled and gets them distributed all over the town. Ratan receives a huge bribe for clearing a huge pile of useless military materials lying in Bombay, before Chinese invasion. The entire deal is master-minded by Himmat Singh, popularly known as the Sheikh. Himmat Singh bribes Ratan at the instance of the minister and the secretary of his department.
The height of hypocrisy is to be found in his lashing at corruption in India while all the time he is trying to sort out in his own mind his reasons for accepting the huge bribe. He has no answer to give for his refusing the bribe offered by the contractor's son when he really needed the money, and so had reason to be tempted, and his accepting it now when he does not need the money in any way either for survival or happiness. He tries to reason it by saying that it is like his taking a third cup of tea for no real need but because it is offered and other people are drinking too. He feels that being trapped in the corrupt system where "men were weighed in money or power", he has no option, but to seek "solace from the annals of corruption" (P-108). Ratan justifies his action as follows:

"If I had taken a bribe I belonged rather to the rule than the exception. Peons were frequently taking bribes. So were government officials and traffic policemen and railway conductors. A bribe could get you a bed in a hospital, a place to burn you're dead. Doctors had a fee to give false certificates, magistrates for false judgements. For a sum of money politicians changed sides. For a larger sum they declared wars. Bribery was accepted by factory inspectors, bank agents and college professors; by nurses, priests... All this I knew and had known for twenty years" (P-108-109).

Ratan makes a sincere scrutiny of his career as an apprentice to the wicked society and tries to understand when and how things began to
change. In the process he looks into his hypocrisy, cowardice and the futility of his existence. This change in him corresponds to the change that took place in the life of the nation. After the independence of nation people are found to be disappointed and disillusioned. Ministers give false statements. Everybody craves for money and other considerations are relegated to background. Ratan too is, interested in what happened to him, “and not to” the wide world in general” (P-62). Ratan wants to be different from others like his father. But he finds himself a coward and conformist. He does not have the courage and self-confidence of Billy Biswas to rise against the corrupt society. If it was defiance in Billy’s case, it is acceptance and allegiance that ultimately results in dispossession and alienation of Ratan. He becomes: “a weather vane turning its head where the wind blows” or a “blotting paper” (P-63) that changes its colour with the change of the colour of the ink. The result is a sense of impotence, alienation dispossession and failure. But unlike his father who mustered courage and overcame his weakness, Ratan throws in the sponge and swims with the current. Ratan’s restlessness and apathy have an adverse effect on his health. He becomes painfully conscious of the ‘slouch’ in his posture and his feeling ‘used up’, though his physician laughs at his complain and reassures him that he is ‘fit as a horse’. No zeal for life or revolution remains in him:

“All the time, inside, there was no revolution at all. Only boredom and discontent, discontent that burst periodically into panic” – (P-65).
In spite of his discontent and restlessness, Ratan continues his treacherous career through sycophancy. He finds solace in the fact that he is not alone in his pursuit of career through dubious means: “believe me we were all like that. I was not the only one. Please believe me” (P-67). Restrained tensions are bound to explode sooner or later and that is what happens in Ratan’s tussle with his higher self. Ratan begins to experience bouts of restlessness and apathy that leave him a frustrated man in the family and a lethargic indifferent employee in the office. He forces a sincere officer in his department to ask for transfer because the officer wants to enhance efficiency and streamline the general set-up of administration of the office. Moreover, Ratan wants to get rid of the officer so as to be promoted to that post himself. It reminds him of his father’s grim fight to get rid of the British Raj, and he feels ashamed of his own cunningness and selfishness in contrast to the nobility and selflessness of his father. The officer’s parting statement disturbs Ratan.

“If I have asked for a transfer it is not because you have defeated me but because I consider it a waste of time to work with men like you. It is pity because my first impression of you was that you were a bit like me. But I was obviously mistaken” (P-68).

The escapist tendency in Ratan of trying to push to the back of his mind any thought that forces him to accept responsibility makes him forget the
young officer. It is significant that the tears he sheds in the temple belie his pretended confidence. His own admission illustrates this:

"Why blame my wife? It is true her discontent got on my nerves, rather unnerved me. It created for me perpetual disturbance, the nagging feeling that our lives had been robbed of an essential substance, that I had somehow failed her. The feeling generated in me a great confusion. What had I done, what had I done which I should not have done? What was right, what was wrong? What was the measure for doing things or not doing them? Where were the dividing lines: between success and failure, loyalty and betrayal, love and hate? The confusion reduced me to the status of those leaves of autumn that are blown here and there, at the mercy of wind. Why be surprised if one of them falls into the sewer? (P-69).

The paradox and plight of Ratan becomes more obvious in his efforts to belong to the society by sharing in its guilt that creates in him a spiritual alienation much worse than any other social alienation. He becomes a slave to the system. A strange lethargy creeps into his life crippling him physically and mentally. R.G. Das equates Ratan to other protagonists of the west:

"Arun Joshi appears very close to Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and William Golding in the sense that the act of
treachery inflicts an irreparable injury upon the moral nature of man, and that a guilty Ratan lives inescapably in the presence of his conscience. He too realizes a Razumov does in Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*, that all a man can betray is his conscience” (9).

Ratan’s inclination for taking bribe to clear the sub-standard war materials is further aggravated by his consciousness of his own insignificant position in the larger government machinery. Nevertheless, he offers in his characteristic style, his own reasoning:

“And if there was to be defeat, I had thought, then it was bound to be so irrespective of what I did or did not do. How could my little act matter one way or another” (P-70).

The feeling of his own insignificance in the government machinery gives way to feeling of alienation and dispossession, a feeling of the deplorable loss of the self and his own identity.

“I was a nobody. A NOBODY. Deep down I was convinced that I had lost significance: As an official; as a citizen, as a man” (P-70).

Ratan’s conformism to the demands of his murderous society, thus, results in his acceptance of his own position as merely a cog in the giant wheel of the society. Once fallen from the human heights he ravel in the
mire of humiliations and ironically considers his allegiance, his compromises as the needs of time. Lost in the labyrinth of time, he would go to any extent to gratify his fallen, lost and faceless self. He would do anything to please his masters, in order to achieve his ulterior motives, he would even: “lick THEIR boots, and put on smiles for THEIR pleasure” (P-17).

Himmat Singh in a way is responsible for degeneration of Ratan. It is Sheikh who feeds wrong values to Ratan. Whenever Ratan has any apprehension about morals, it is Sheikh who drags Ratan into the mire. He always brings home the point to Ratan that it is money which tells:

“You are a fool, he said... people thought there was a law book laid down by God which they must follow... there was no such law book, Rathor he said. What existed he said, was not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for money” (P-72).

In the company of Sheikh, Ratan realizes the importance of money and his craze for money intensifies. He wants to have money by any means. The ill-gotten money leads him to wine and women. He becomes fond of women. He even pays visits to brothels. He thinks:

“I had merely walked into a brothel hounded by a strange disturbance. All that I could think of was my money and the fact that I was not enjoying life or what I imagined
“enjoying” life meant. The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied and the more I was determined to ‘enjoy’ life (P-85)”. The war is lost. The Brigadier returns from the war and suffers nervous breakdown. He is taken to a hospital. Ratan is not allowed to meet Brigadier. Later, when he meets Brigadier he suffers the pain of another person as his own. Brigadier is accused of deserting the camp and faces court-martial. He deserts because the defective war equipment supplied by Ratan fails. The superintendent of Police asks Ratan to confess his crime and save Brigadier. Ratan does not muster enough courage to confess. He thinks that he is not an ordinary criminal but a martyr who is:

“expected to make amends to redress the terrible wrong that he had inflicted on so many men” (P-114).

He realises that his life for twenty years has been a life of bargains, bribery and debauchery. As night advances, he feels restless and a sense of panic overcomes him. He tries to awake his sleeping wife and confess but cannot do so on account of fear and shame. This failure of communication, his lack of courage to confide the truth to his wife also emblematises his alienation even from his better half. Ratan at last prepares a carefully worded confession with enough loopholes for him to wriggle his way out, when once the Brigadier’s name is cleared. It is for this reason that Ratan carefully refrains from making any mention of Himmat Singh. All the time he feels he is doing the Brigadier a great
favour. He changes his mind in the last minute and tells him that it would be more convenient to send the confession the next day by registered post. He never posts that letter. His failure to make confession and accept moral responsibility of his crime only delays his self-realization. After two weeks Ratan comes to know that the Brigadier has committed suicide by shooting himself. The death of Brigadier shocks Ratan and a terrible fear grips him. He becomes alien to himself:

"Was it a dream, a nightmare hallucination caused by some poisonous drug? Or, was I not Ratan Rathor, an official of the Government of India but someone else someone born of criminal parents dragged out of the slums of the Old City? If I was not Ratan Rathor, what was I? Was I a thief? A scoundrel? Was I the murderer they said I was" (P-106).

Ratan continues with his play-acting and also goes on wearing faces and appearances. But he feels lonely and friendless in the office and even at home. He keeps his agony to himself. He even does not tell it to his wife and daughter for the fear that they will not understand him. So, "the silence remained. The panic remained. And I remained alone" (P-130). A sense of alienation and dispossession overtakes him. He thinks he is cut off from everything and everybody relentlessly alienated and disposessed. His nights and days are devoid of peace:

"no concurrence, no conversation, no visit of either friend or foe, no sleep in spite of the sleeping pills that our good
doctor gave me, no relief, no respite from the hands that pulled me steadily down towards those caverns where, I felt certain, the Brigadier had gone” (P-125).

The death of Brigadier pricks his conscience and ignites psychological upheaval. He looks down upon himself and yet defends himself and justifies his deeds in sheer desperation and blames his society for its ruthless indifference and also for carving him to its needs.

"Deep down I was convinced that I had lost significance: As an official; as a citizen; as a man... They wanted this. Did they ever stop to think what I wanted? What right had they to claim my loyalties, take me for granted? What right? - Oh! how I have hated THEM at times. And hated myself” (P-70-71).

Ratan considers Himmat Singh, the Sheikh, responsible for his moral degeneration. Ratan however, holds himself, responsible for the suicide of the Brigadier. He decides to take revenge. He takes a gun to kill Sheikh whom he thinks as the main cause for his degradation. Sheikh informs Ratan that he is dying and he has not betrayed him. He tells Ratan that he alone is not responsible for the deal. The minister and the secretary, the same secretary whom everyone considers as a model of upright conduct – are the instigators of the plot to make fast money out of the arms deal. They both wanted a scapegoat. They picked Ratan because he was a “spineless flunkey” (P-131).
Sheikh retorts Ratan and puts him in his right place.

“You are bogus Ratan Rathor... From top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendship, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing but poses a bundle of shams”, (P-131).

Ratan is further unnerved to discover that it is the secretary himself who in order to ward off suspicion from himself, cunningly tips off the police about Ratan’s possible involvement in the plot. Ratan is overcome by feeling of utter weariness; he tries to conjure up before his eyes a picture of his past twenty five years of life and the futility of his endeavours:

“A pile of dung. Twenty years and nothing gained. An empty lifetime. What had I learned? Pushing files? Manoeuvring? At forty-five all that I knew was to manoeuvre. A trickster, that was what I had left life make of me. Did I know the meaning of honour, friendship? Did I ever know it? Would I ever know it again? (P-133)

He cries out in agony: “Father, Father, what I have done?” (P-134). He finds himself isolated and this acute sense of alienation and the shock of dispossession hits him very hard. He realises that something is completely wrong with him.

Sheikh further tells moving account of his life. His father was a revolutionary and his mother was forced by society to become a whore.
He tells Ratan of his childhood days, of poverty and privation, of one sister running away from home, the other dying of pneumonia, and his own life taking up a variety of odd jobs to make both ends meet. Regarding his present occupation of a racketeer, he expresses total satisfaction as it gives him an outlet for his hatred against the society. With each success his confidence grows. His mother is shocked and she curses him: “God’s darkness has come over you” (P-139). There is no escape from darkness. He is also lost in the crooked ways of the world. In great anguish Sheikh cries:

“But if it was God’s darkness… What was the cure of a crooked world. None, perhaps. Revolution, perhaps... perhaps God Himself. God alone perhaps could remove His darkness. But where was God?... What was God? And where?” (P-140).

Ratan’s words explain the existential dilemma of the entire generation. Deprived of all the props in life they cannot even take recourse to the consoling idea of God. Their unrestrained and self-justifying rationalism and scepticism has turned them spiritually sterile, for them existence ipso facto, precedes essence. The same questions vex Ratan too. Sheikh tells Ratan that:

“My soul was killed, you put yours to pawn. But souls that were pawned could perhaps be retrieved” (P-140).
Sheikh also reminds Ratan his father and his successful past, he pleads:

"Try to put yourself to use, Ratan Rathor... It might be too late. You have been too long the slave. But give it a try. One lost nothing" (P-141).

The words of Sheikh have a profound impact on Ratan and are largely responsible for a change in his outlook on life. Ratan’s earlier confusion about good and evil is now cleared. His alienation and sense of dispossession are changed into a constructive behaviour. He reminds the advice of his father, who used to tell him: “Be good. Be decent. Be of use” (P-143).

Arun Joshi here differs from Graham Greene. R.J. Das views that:

"For Joshi, the experience of the Absurd constitutes the starting point of his movement towards affirmation”, and for Graham Greene, “it is descent into abysmal pessimism” (10).

Ratan is a man of affirmation. He seeks the remedy for his alienation neither in renunciation of wicked society or in dispossession. He remains in the same society and learns to be of use of others: “without vanity and without expectations and also without cleverness” (P-143). He chooses to expiate his sin by putting himself and his soul to use. The choice comes from within. In Kirkegaardian sense, he makes the ethical choice and
surrenders to God. He begins the process of cleansing the filth gathered on his inner world and realizing the God in him. The service is completely selfless. Ratan does penance for his misdeeds by going to the temple every morning on his way to the office and wiping the shoes left near the threshold by the devotees who have gone into pray:

"Each morning before I go to work, I come here. I sit on the steps of the temple and while they pray I wipe the shoes of the congregation. Then, when they are gone, I stand in the doorway. I never enter the temple. I am not concerned with what goes on in there. I stand at the doorstep and I fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness. Of a large host: my father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not" (P-142-43).

Even the memory of these shoes, according to Ratan, acts as a check on his lapsing back into his old ways. His grateful reference to the talismanic effect of his memory is worth noting:

"And during the day whenever I find myself getting to be clever, lazy, vain, indifferent, I put my hands to my face
and there is the smell of a hundred feet that must at that moment be toiling somewhere and I am put in my place” (P-143).

It is late but Ratan continues his struggle. He is positive and re-establishes faith in life and himself. He says:

“I know it is late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair” (P-143).

He wants to make a second start as it is not late to do so. A positive thinking and realization dawns on him. It gives a new turn to his life. He learns through his painful experience with life the meaning of his father’s advice: “Whatever you do touches someone somewhere” (P-143).

Continually tortured and tormented Ratan finally seeks a way out of the ineluctable and stifling realities of alienation and dispossession. He relocates his genuine self in the religion of service, humility, humanism and a sense of responsibility towards one and all. It is revealed to him that the redemptive possibilities are inextricably linked with human dignity and amelioration of mankind. The impact of Ratan’s fall from innocence and virtue on his psyche is certainly destructive. But the experience has enlightened, enriched and humanised him. The sense of alienation and dispossession is finally transcended by a desire to return and to reach out.
References:


3. Das R.J., P-45.


10. Ibid.
Arun Joshi’s fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth* published in 1981, won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. Daruwalla found *The Last Labyrinth* to be “a novel of ideas, of concepts, of events delicately synchronized to a plan” (1). Rekha Rani finds in *The Last Labyrinth* dreams structured systematically: “The first and the last part of the novel contains two dreams in each and the middle one consists of only one dream. In the former division the dreams are short and simple but in the latter the dream is simple and longer one” (2). Dr. Satish Kumar opines that “in *The Last Labyrinth* the material and spiritual dimensions have been correlated with commendable sureness and expression” (3). Devinder Mohan is of the opinion that Arun Joshi makes the narrator (Som) work out the historical reality within himself, so that he could define “the fictional voice by visualizing the natural impulse moving towards its own destruction” (4). These reviews certainly throw light on the different dimensions of the novel. However, the central thematic concern of Arun Joshi’s fiction that has been taken up remains unattended.

In *The Last Labyrinth* too Arun Joshi continues his engagement with the theme of alienation and dispossession. The treatment of the theme of alienation and dispossession in this novel indicates a different dimension and direction. In *The Foreigner* the sense of alienation in the protagonist Sindi, is initiated because of his acute awareness of the self being continually threatened by the malevolent socio-cultural forces. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* the sense of alienation is intensified
because of some mystical urge. Both Sindi and Billy feel suffocated, anguished and dispossessed to their genuine selves, however, succeed in escaping from their intriguing societies. In The Apprentice the protagonist Ratan’s intense desire for social achievements, name, fame, power and position propels him into the materialistic society. And ultimately Ratan feels alienated in a crowd that in itself is essentially lonely. Surrounded by the faceless people Ratan feels himself exiled and dispossessed. In The Last Labyrinth alienation of Som is due to his wavering, his obstinate refusal to sacrifice his rational approach and intellectual pride and his failure to accept the beliefs of his community.

The Last Labyrinth is a fascinating exploration of the turbulent inner world of a successful young urban Indian. Som Bhaskar, the narrator-protagonist, is an ambitious son of a prosperous industrialist. He strains every nerve to achieve what he wants – the business shares of Aftab Rai and his mistress Anuradha. He is a typical westernized, affluent bourgeoisie who has been restlessly searching for his roots and in this process he discovers only a haunting emptiness and void. In the futile pursuit of realizing his ambition he gets mentally shattered and physically exhausted with vague dreams and insomnia:

“I looked at myself in the mirror: lean, crow-footed, greying. I could not then, see the hunger but there was the boredom and the fed-up-ness endless depths of it... I woke
up in the middle of the night, depressed the taste of tranquilisers in my mouth” (P-21).

The novel shows the hollowness of modern aristocratic world. He is influenced by Cartesian rationalism and Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest. He is sceptical of Indian spiritual thoughts and religious beliefs. His rationalism and logical approach do not help the dilemma he faces. His alienation, loneliness and uprooted ness remain and the affirmation and communion that his predecessors – Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas and Ratan Rathor – attained at the end of their traumatic but fruitful encounter with life, eludes him. He is at the end lost in introspective encounter, and waits for his encounter with the last labyrinth, death, which alone can, perhaps, resolve his doubts and contradictions.

The word ‘labyrinth’ and its analogues like ‘maze’ and ‘impasse’ recur in all of Arun Joshi’s novels. But it is only in The Labyrinth that the word comes to acquire: “a thematic resonance and a metaphoric inclusiveness” (5). It is associated with the protagonist’s attempt to unravel the mysteries of life, love, death and divinity. The word labyrinth has been used in its literal and metaphoric senses by various writers before Arun Joshi.

It can be traced back to the story of Minotaur in Greek mythology told by Ovid and Appollodorus (6). Daedalus, a great architect was
ordered by Minos, the ruler of Crete, to construct a place of confinement for Minotaur, a monster, half-bull and half-man. Daedalus built a labyrinth which was famous for its intricate structure. Once inside one would go endlessly along its winding paths without ever finding the exit. To this intricate labyrinth Minos, who had invaded and seized Athens, forced the helpless Athenians to send a tribute of seven maidens and seven young men every nine years. A terrible fate awaited these helpless creatures. In whatever direction they ran they would be running straight to the monster that devoured them. There was no possible way of escape. Finally, however, Theseus, the great Athenian hero and the son of King Aegeus, succeeded in killing the monster and coming out of the labyrinth with the help of Ariadne, Minos’s daughter. She had fallen in love with Theseus and in exchange of his promise to marry her, gave him clue to get out of the labyrinth.

Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine magic realist suggests that the ‘labyrinth’s is used in his writings to denote the enigmas of life and the universe as well as of the human mind. In ‘Labyrinth’ an anthology of Borges’s stories, essays and poems – one notices forking paths, puzzling corridors, dark and interwoven mazes that treacherously lead to the same chamber, circular and heterogeneous labyrinths and endlessly spiral staircases. For Borges labyrinths are the images of human thought, of the “insatiable human thirst to know and vindicate oneself” (7).
The Last Labyrinth, the word can be operative on many levels. On the surface level, it alludes to the last of labyrinths in Lal Haveli at Benaras, the kind one finds in ‘bholbhulaiyan’ at Lucknow. Lal Haveli, where almost all important activities in the novel take place, is situated in the tortuous lanes of Benaras and finally becomes a “sepulchral, sensual den of Aftab, amidst the labyrinths of Benaras” (P-23). It is: “a labyrinth within the labyrinth of lanes that stretch westwards from the ghats of Benaras” (P-29). In one of his poems P.B.Shelley refers to the city of Venice as: “a people labyrinth of walls” (8) because it comprises about 120 islands on each of which is a tortuous labyrinth of narrow, paved streets and lanes. Benaras, too, has labyrinths of narrow and tortuous lanes because of its being a very old city while motorized transport required broad streets that did not exist. In these lanes exists Lal Haveli and its labyrinths which have so much been associated with intense and passionate activities of his life even though Bhaskar wonders if they existed at all in reality. In order to ascertain that Lal Haveli is not a vapour-like figment of imagination, Bhaskar recapitulates certain images associated with it:

“A desolate garden; an alley; a brooding windowless façade; white-washed walls smudged with the hands of rickshaw-pullers; a broken fountain, a ceiling full of unlit chandeliers; ventilators of stained glass. Where else could have I seen the sarcophagus of green marble that, even in my dreams, possesses the power to chill me?” (P-29).
The location of Lal Haveli and the structure of the building itself are a pointer to the existence of wheels within wheels. But even wheels within wheels are patterned along certain predictable lines within which one’s movement is usually smooth whereas: “a labyrinth within the labyrinth of lanes” in Benaras refers to a puzzling structure, purposely constructed to mislead an enemy so that he fails to come out of it. The puzzling nature of Lal Haveli and more so of its labyrinths correspondingly imply the mystifying nature of its inhabitants. The conversation between Aftab and Som Bhaskar reveals the mystery of Lal Haveli.

“My ancestors baffled their enemies this way. There are rooms within rooms, corridors that only bring you back to where you started... 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 the last labyrinth?”...

“Why, death of course” I looked at him puzzled.

“I meant the labyrinth of this house”.

“Yes... Yes...” he said vaguely and went ahead” (P-37).

Aftab concedes the fact of the haveli’s decadence but affirming at the same time that its labyrinths remain intact. In order to baffle the enemies, the haveli is built like a labyrinth with rooms within rooms and with corridors that only bring the person back to where he had started. If a man were to be locked up in one of the rooms, he might never be found,
nor his cries ever heard. Though "death" is believed to be lurking in the last labyrinth, this fact is denied by Anuradha who considers it one of the make-beliefs of both Aftab and Bhaskar. Anuradha traces the idea of the labyrinth of Lal Haveli to the bhulbhulaiyan of Lucknow after the visit of which Aftab had thought that Lal Haveli too is built like a bhulbhulaiyan.

The haveli, because of its architectural peculiarity, has been associated with other structures. While the haveli has labyrinths like the bhulbhulaiyan of Lucknow, Gargi's room too becomes "a labyrinth" (P-97) particularly so because its stained glass ventilators resembles those of Aftab's haveli. The darkness in the haveli caused by the electricity failure makes Bhaskar stumble against a hump in the carpet in the same way as one could easily lose: "one's way in the maze of that haveli", (P-218). The danger of losing one's way is voiced by Anuradha who tells Som Bhaskar: "Things could happen to you in this haveli and no one would ever know" (P-219). This fear of unknown dangers in the haveli turns out to be true when Anuradha disappears. The police searched the haveli without finding her, confirming what Anuradha had warned against "things could happen in this haveli without leaving a trace" (P-220). While describing the boat-journey to Gargi's cottage on the other bank of the Ganga Som Bhaskar writes:

"I felt as though I had moved not two hundred yards, but two hundred miles from the town of Benaras, from all towns, from the planet itself. I felt as though this was not
Ganga but some unknown stream, in some unknown segment of the universe, leading to a reality that I had not yet known" (49).

Som Bhaskar’s world is tortuous and winding, full of dark and intricate alleys as the location of the haveli and the nature of its labyrinths. Arun Joshi had used the word labyrinth in the same sense in his earlier novels too. Sindi Oberoi in The Foreigner talks of his sad affair with Kathy as the wound that still bled: “somewhere in the labyrinth of my consciousness” (P-68). Similarly Romesh Sahai in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas talks of life’s meaning lying:

“not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish for ever hidden from the dazzling light of the sun” (P-8)

to the call of which he had abandoned himself. In The Last Labyrinth, too, Lal Haveli and its labyrinths have close association with Som Bhaskar’s education, costing a quarter-million rupees in the world’s finest universities. The haveli is a unique piece from the past; Bhaskar from the enlightened present. One is non-human; the other is human, though the former touches and affects the latter. They may not have a complete correspondence but Lal Haveli remains what Som Bhaskar gradually becomes — “an odd mixture of the decrepit and the affluent” (P-33). Bhaskar’s cries are muffled. No one hears Anuradha’s cries even when
she has done all she can to give an extra lease of life to her lover by pleading with Gargi. The labyrinths of the haveli, as per professed arms of its feudal architects, continue to puzzle and confuse Bhaskar, and to create in him some kind of void, hunger and inadequacy which make his quest directionless with the result that he continues to utter the words, like a refrain: "I want, I want, I want" (P-11). Som Bhaskar’s quest for love is tortuous as the mazes of narrow alleys in Benaras or the labyrinth of Lal Haveli. The association of labyrinth can be extended further from Bhaskar’s life to the lives of the people in general. Sujatha Mathai is right when she says that Joshi:

"sees lives as labyrinths - hopeless mazes where you may get irretrievably lost or discover the shining secrets of the core of life" (9).

The lives of Anuradha, Aftab, Som Bhaskar and his father are characterized by the wanderings in the labyrinth. Anguished quest of Som Bhaskar constitutes the plot of the novel.

The structure of the novel is extremely complicated. The novel itself reads like a labyrinth. Joshi in the novel employs an intricate technique of narration. The diary form of the novel is combined with introspection and flashback as well as little bits and pieces of the brain as they collide in the brain of the protagonist. There is no unity of time and places. The narrator constantly switches from one level of time to another and the locale shifts as quickly as his fast moving thoughts. The
way he zigzags into his memory resembles a maze and is a reflection on his inner turbulence and restlessness. Characters and places are set against one another until, as Harish Trivedi puts it:

“all these sharply structured antitheses dissolve to form a rich and vibrant kaleidoscope much as the succession of identical rooms in Lal Haveli produces the effect of a labyrinth. Indeed, the novel, like Lal Haveli, seems constructed to a most meticulous plan, though directed at an elusive objective” (10).

Som Bhaskar is a rich industrialist. He is young, educated and intelligent. He has been to the finest universities of the world. He is married to Geeta and has two children. Geeta is “an extraordinary woman” (P-11). He apparently leads a happy life. He owns plastic manufacturing industry. Apparently he has almost every thing like money, health, name and social status that is needed for a cosy and comfortable life. But ironically, all his affluence and materialistic achievements do not seem to make him at peace with himself and the ambiance he breathes in. Both, the things and society project themselves in quite an antagonistic way. They, in fact, offer a contradictory perspective in his personal, interpersonal and social context. His achievements, ipso facto, have disappointed and disillusioned him. His drives for money and materialistic means have, on the contrary, further aggravated his sense of isolation and futility. Finally it is revealed to him
that “money was dirt, a whore. So were houses, cars, carpets” (P-11). Som is in turmoil. He feels sick and lost, fragmented and frustrated. But wherein the problem of anguish and anxiety lies remains a nagging question. He is engaged in a Sysyphian task of locating the sickness of his mind and soul. He is alienated and his alienation is not from chaos of the world outside but from the chaos within himself. In spite of a beautiful wife and availability of means and methods of pleasure and happiness. Som is continually tormented by some missing dimension in his life. He is restless because of an indefinable hunger. He is tormented by a sense of dispossession, of a void both within and outside self: “It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and empty spaces, within and without” (P-47). These voids constantly haunt him and he finds life absolutely meaningless and directionless. Deprived of social, moral and cultural anchors, all human values and authentic relationships appear an allusion to him. He finds nothing sustaining and granting him a strong foothold on the ground and an incessant uncertainties and restlessness govern his entire personality, his interpersonal and social relationship. A prisoner of his own gloomy view, he is always apprehensive about the imminent realities of life.

Inflicted by his sense of dispossession, Som ransacks various possibilities of reconciliating himself to the heart shattering realities of life. But all his efforts end in smoke. Dejected and disillusioned he tries to appease his hunger by possession of an object, a business enterprise, a
woman. But after securing them all, nothing remains important to him. He tells this problem to his friend and physician K:

"for many years now I have had this awful feeling that I wanted something. But the sad thing was it didn’t make the slightest difference when I managed to get what I had wanted. My hunger was just as bad as ever" (P-189).

He develops relations with women, he starts new business, but instead of fulfilment he experiences disappointment, dejection and dissatisfaction. He feels alienated more and more. But, despite his efforts the reason, the root cause of his anguish and angst eludes him. Frustrated and fragmented, he takes recourse to tranquilizers to confront the utter loneliness and sleeplessness at nights.

"If I stayed up all night chaffing tranquilizers, not knowing why I was awake and came close to tears because I did not know it came pretty close to sorrow" (P-109).

His inner void keeps gnawing, threatening to devour him up. His predicament is aggravated by his acute awareness of the futility of his endeavours. Life thus becomes a complex and confusing affair; “a labyrinth within the labyrinth” (P-29) like the lanes of Benaras, comparable to the “meaningless flights of stairs” (P-34) or “a fisherman’s net” (P-37). He always feels haunted “like a hare chased by unseen bounds” (P-12), a “worn-out weary man incapable of spontaneous
feeling” (P-14). Torn by the tortuous ways of life, he is at the end of his tether, he falls sick. But the void and ennui keep hovering over him even in the hospital. His perception of the world and men besetting it, in the following passage, testifies his dislike and disgust for the materialistic drives, self-centeredness and lasciviousness of the modern man. Bereaved of the moral stature and spiritual finesse, he is hardly better than an animal or an insect, a cockroach or a car, a victim of trivial monotony or directionless ness.

“I felt a new loathing for the squalid world that carried on beneath my hospital window. All those buses and cars and taxis and men scurrying back and forth like cockroaches” (P-46).

The use of low mimetic mode and the pattern of similes and symbols deserve special attention in terms of his physical and psychological conditions, his absolute isolation, alienation and the loss of his own self. He is in fact, a fractured vision that aggravates his disjunction and dislocation and intensifies his sense of despair. His sense of dignity and integrity is shattered. He feels miserably confused and finds himself absolutely helpless on the crucial issues of one’s own being. He makes a confession to Anuradha:

“I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus... Why am I here? Why do I come here?” (P-107).
Else where again he finds himself “a bottomless pit of despair” and feels “like a shipwrecked sailor sinking into the ocean” (P-144).

Som wants to know everything in life “the secrets of the universe” (P-129) and riddle of a woman. The difficulty with him is his rational and analytical mind that refuses to take anything for granted. Anything that cannot be known or logically conceived, does not exist for him. He develops a fear of death after his mother’s death and this fear is continually intensified with the passage of time. His fear of death in fact is deeply rooted in his fear of life. As K tells him: “But all in all, it is not death but life that you are bothered about” (P-203) Som’s problems are not of his own making, they come to him from his father and grand father. Som, as we know, has much more of the western bent of mind. His intellectual and rational faculty is shaped by the culture. And the western world is essentially a world of rationalism and expediency. It is a world where superstition and dogmas do not enjoy a place. Som talks about his dilemma when he and K are on their way to the temple of Krishna on the mountain, in search of the missing shares of Aftab Rai’s company:

Sitting there I though of good old Leela and her friend Descartes. ‘I think, therefore, I exist’. Everything could be reasoned out, she said. And I was on my way to reason out Krishna Himself. Descartes should have approved. Of course, Descartes was no agnostic. He granted the
existence of God. Since the idea of God existed in men's mind, he reasoned, it must have been God himself who had put it there in the first place. But the times had changed... Children were brought up to believe they were born with blank minds. They were brought up to challenge everything... So the children of the west grew up doubting everything. And, now it had come to the East... I could see it all too clearly in my own case, even in my father's case. Except that his faith in reason seemed to totter towards the end. Faith in reason was, after all, also a faith. Why not faith in a god? Was that what this ass-breaking trip was really about? To know if God existed? Surely, if He could hold shares, He could give other evidence of His existence (P-178-79).

Som Bhaskar inherits infliction and contradictions from his father and grandfather. From his father, he inherits curiosity, scepticism and logical approach to life. His father was a brilliant chemist, a businessman and owner of a plastic industry. He was interested in the mystery of universe and had a philosophical bent of mind.

He watches through his telescope the vast emptiness of the interstellar space night after night in search of a clue to the mystery of the universe, but in vain. When his faith in science and reason crumbled, he
turned to philosophy and metaphysics. But he was not satisfied by the vagueness of the answer they provided:

"Who knows the truth? Who can tell whence and how arose the universe? The gods are later than its beginning: Who knows, therefore, whence comes this reaction? Only that God who sees in highest heaven; He only knows whence came this universe. He only knows. Or, perhaps, He knows not" (P-155)

He could not make up his mind and his disappointment with the arrangements of the universe. Disappointment and dejection resulted in melancholia and he died. Scepticism of Som’s father could not make any impact on Som then, because he was busy in the pursuit of worldly things. Som’s grand father was a man of the world. He believed in the satisfaction of impulse and senses. According to Som, his grand father was:

"a man-about-town, a gourmet, fond of women and drink. He had mistresses among the young starlets. He was a good friend but a terrible enemy, not above taking recourse to the gun. 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 my grand mother held Kirtans" (P-156).
Som, like Ratan Rathor of *The Apprentice* is a child of double inheritance - both contrary to each other. From his father he inherited hunger of spirit and from his grandfather hunger of the body. Both the hungrs however, do not provide him any remedy or solace. He cries in pain:

And where did I fit in? I was a womanizer all right, and a boozar, but my womanizing and boozing had not settled anything. I had inherited the afflictions of both of them - for what were they if not afflictions, afflictions that had led me into unbearable entanglements. A year ago, although battered, I was getting by fairly reasonably. I had a loving wife. I worked more or less regular hours. I had ambition of sorts. And, where was I at now? I still had a loving wife. I had lost a lover whom I couldn’t forget even though I was busy devising every possible stratagem that could destroy her. I was probably running down perfectly good companies. I could die any day, any moment. While I lived I made a fool of myself. For K, for Geeta, for many others I have become a pain in the ass. So where was I at? And why? Why else if not for the afflictions bestowed upon me by my genes. I was in deep trouble. And I knew it (P-156-157).

As against the scientific temperament of his father, his mother was a religious lady. She had complete faith in religion and God. She suffered for her faith. When she suffered from cancer, she did not take
treatment. She believed that Krishna would cure her. Krishna would not
cure her and she had to succumb to death. Som inherits faith in religion
from his mother. Science and religion strain and torture him. Som’s
upbringing in India is an ambience had already developed an inclination
towards religion. He studies in the west and develops materialistic
outlook, practical wisdom and reliance on reason. All these influences
are strengthened by his father when he comes back to India. Som does
not have a definite faith either in religion or reason and materialism. He
is caught in the vortex of different impulses. From his grandfather he
inherits womanizing, drinking and impulsiveness. From father’s side he
inherits a Pascalian inclination towards reason and interrogation. Som is
cought in contradictory impulses. The opposite impulses of reason and
intuition, doubt and faith, illusion and reality, resistance and submission
create a vacuum in him. He is puzzled by “this going forward and
backward and sideways of the mind” (P-53).

Som narrates inner conflicts of his mind with all their force and
pressure. The Last Labyrinth delineates Som’s mind that is in disarray
like that of a Jungian or Pirandellian man. H.M.Prasad aptly remarks:

“Like Jungian and Pirandellian man, he is full of inner
disharmony and is a loose cluster of masks or fragments of
identity” (11).
Som is unable to understand as what has gone wrong. He is continually tormented by a sense of loneliness and estrangement, by a painful awareness of the lack of meaning and purpose—both in the creation—universe—and man—of a lack of harmony and a sense of belonging. An old man during his conversation directly/indirectly explains Som’s plight, his inner disruptions. He points out:

"It is possible... to conceive of this world as being populated not with people of flesh and blood, with certain sexual orientation, but with souls. You can imagine this planet humming with souls, each wanting something. Of course, many might want the same thing. A soul might also imagine that his wants, desires are best met through another soul, if that soul is the right one. That, no doubt, is a big if. Until he meets this right soul there is no peace. When you meet the right soul then, of course, things might be peaceful, may even move on towards a higher goal (P-74).

Som demands a proof of the existence of souls, the psychiatrist replies: "We assume certain things a priori in all exercises of logic" (P-75). Som is not satisfied with the reasoning and feels more confused.

In search of relief and resolution, Som is continually in search of a person who could solve his problem of contradictions. He finds a person in Leela Sabnis:
"a professor, descendant of a long time of professors. M.A.
and Ph.D. from Michigan, something else from London"
(P-75)

a scholar who knows Marathi, Sanskrit, French and German besides
English, Hindi and Tamil well versed in the thoughts and ideologies of
philosophers like Descartes, Freud, Jung, Spinoza and others. He
develops sexual relations with her with an anticipation of the dissolution
of difference and distance. The sense of acute distance and difference
nevertheless persists. Because Leela is an intellectual being and a
compulsive speaker. She is an intellect governed by logic and reason,
who instead of establishing an emotional and passionate rapport with
Som and assuaging his frustrating sense of loneliness and void
intellectualizes the issues. She coolly analyses the pathology of Som’s
psychological upheaval. She is much more a scientist and an analyst
rather than a passionate lover – notwithstanding her flawless
comprehension of their transient alliance. Sabnis, therefore, further
aggravates his yearnings, his desperate desire for enduring human bond.

“Leela Sabnis analyzed too much. She analyzed like other
people breathe. If we are talking of compulsions, there was
a woman who had a compulsion to talk, to analyze. There
was nothing that she could not work out through cool
analysis: the universe, the living and the dead, worlds seen
and unseen” (P-78).
Sabnis believes in reason, in the logical theory of cause and effect. The following conversation between Som and Leela Sabnis reveals the status of their relationship and the two different dispositions that finally emblematize the distance and underscore the impossibility of a selfless blending of individuals:

“What of intuition? Of faith?”
“You cannot have intuition or faith in what you cannot think through”
“What of the world of the soul?”
“That, too, can be reasoned through. Descartes separated matter from spirit. The Soul, too, has to be reasoned through”...
“What about Spinoza?”
“What about him?”
“Didn’t he say both matter and spirit embraced in God, and flowed from Him?”
“That is bullshit” (P-81).

In her view the world of matter and that of spirit can never meet. Som is not satisfied with her reasoning. She tells him that:

“You are lonely on the one hand. On the other, you have built a shell around yourself. To protect yourself... Against
your feelings of inadequacy... you are bored, bored stiff in
your little shell. That is the long and short of it” (P-80).

Som’s love affair with Leela Sabnis fizzes out after six months because
Som needs “something somebody, somewhere in which the two world
combined” (P-82). Som’s dilemma is that he cannot separate the physical
world from the spiritual. He seeks one who can fulfil his twin hungers of
body and spirit. His married life with Geeta does not work properly
because Geeta does not have these twin qualities of body and spirit.

Geeta has all the qualities of a good and faithful wife. She is
intelligent and good mannered. Som says about her: “If discontent is my
trademark, trust is Geeta’s... Geeta trusts like birds fly, like fish swim”
(P-63). She regularly visits temples, shrines, saints and astrologers. She
has absolute trust in him. Som, however, is not satisfied with his married
life. He feels alienated and hung in the vacuum of loneliness.
Consequently, he experiences a strange obsession for women.

Love and enduring human relationship invariably demands
transcendence and going beyond love or relationship initiated and
inspired with a concentrated focus on the achievement of ulterior motives
or gratification of self without any room or freedom granted to the other
involved in, is travesty of purity of relationship and dignity of human
character. Love and lasting human relationship therefore, necessarily call
for reaching out for going beyond one’s own self. We find that Som
Bhaskar desperately tries to have Anuradha. His longing for her is obviously uncontrollably strong, his need and ineluctable desire for her at times he is very deceptive, it has many a time overtone of genuine love and authentic human relationship. But as we know it is motivated and ignited by a narcissistic desire, a desire to possess. This desire for possession, carefully analyzed and understood in fact, deprives the other of his/her individual identity and a sense of personal integrity. Som wants to possess Anuradha totally every inch of her physically, psychologically and even spiritually. He resembles Gerald Crich of D.H.Lawrence’s *Women in Love*. Anuradha on the contrary is not like Gudrun Brangwan, a prisoner of her own ego and self. A derive for possession also demands of the dissolution of the self which ultimately means the loss of identity and anchoring sense of self-possession. Som Bhaskar fails to understand this equilibrium in man-woman (and at the larger level) human relationship. Anuradha on the contrary breaks through the shell of self centeredness and provides evidence of selflessness that is in fact a necessary condition for respectable man-woman relationship.

Som encounters Anuradha first at a meeting of the Plastic Manufacturer’s Association in Delhi’s Intercontinental Hotel. He is attracted towards Anuradha who casts a spell on him. Anuradha looks to him a strange woman with the: “features of women one saw in Mughal miniatures” (P-19) looks like a "medieval courtesan around whom wars might have been fought” (P-133). He draws towards her by: the
unquenched fires that constantly burnt in those haunted eyes”. He is allured by her dark, sexy eyes and: “her body of whose grace and sensuousness she seemed unaware” (P-41). Som decides to take her away from Aftab Rai: Anuradha assumes a purpose and meaning in his life.

Anuradha was born in Bihar-Sharif. Her life has been full of suffering and agony. She is an illegitimate child. Her mother sings for others. Her mother does not marry anybody. After her mother’s death, Anuradha is brought up by her aunt and is taken to Bombay, there she is sent to convent for her education. She also works in films for sometime. Soon she gives up acting and starts living with Aftab in Lal Haveli in Benaras. It is Gargi, a deaf mystic is instrumental in bringing Anuradha close to Aftab. Gargi is a spiritual head to Aftab. After some happy years Aftab suffers financially. Anuradha herself is affected by smallpox and tries to commit suicide. She is saved by K.K. who tells to Som about the suffering of Anuradha:

“You know, Som, my life has been spent amidst misery and suffering but I know of no other human being who suffered as much as Anuradha” (P-189-90).

Her infinite suffering makes her realize the fundamentals of life. She is a contrast to Som’s retreating and regressing self. He is surprised to know
that Anuradha lives with Aftab and is not married to him. She tells to Som:

“I have never been married... It is better not to be anybody’s wife... You can’t marry everyone you love. So why marry anyone at all?” (P-43)

When Som asks her: “Wouldn’t you like to be married to someone”? She replies:

“I imagine I am married to Aftab. I can imagine I am married to you. My mother used to imagine she was married to Lord Krishna” (P-128).

Anuradha believes that by loving Som she is not “particularly unfaithful” (P-134) to Aftab. Gargi considers Anuradha as Som’s Shakti. Gargi tells to Som: “Don’t quarrel. She is your Shakti” (P-121). Som cannot understand the meaning of that. But he learns that Anuradha is indispensable to him. She has paradoxical qualities like antiquity and modernity holiness and adultery, suffering and faith. She tries her best to help Som understand himself.
Anuradha exercises total control over Som. For her, he neglects his business, family, and health, she turns out to be a mystery for Som. He talks about the mysteriousness of Anuradha “She was like the ocean; one could never reach the bottom of her” (P-132). Som reveals to K about Anuradha: “There was more to her than met the eye. A world spinning all by itself. I was infatuated with this mysterious world” (P-189). Som tries to unravel the mystery of Anuradha’s personality:

“There was a 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” (P-89).

To Som, everything looks mysterious. In this “mysterious world” everything is “a haze” (P-110). There is: “a mystery into which everything fitted” (P-161). In the novel, words like: “dream, mystery, doubt, reality and understanding seem to serve as recurrent motifs... the minimal dissection of the thematic material” (12).

After meeting Anuradha first at a meeting of the Plastic Manufacturer’s Association in Delhi, Som irresistibly pays frequent visits to Benaras. His clear intention is to possess Anuradha:
"All I wanted was her. I wanted her body and soul every bit of her. I wasn’t willing to share a hair of her body with anyone" (P-133).

Initially Som wants to possess shares of Aftab. But now he wants to possess Anuradha. He is attracted to the world of Anuradha, Aftab and Gargi. Lal Haveli for Som is: “the micro-cosmic labyrinth of life and reality” (14). Som has doubts and uncertainties about haveli: “Aftab’s haveli, his city, transmitted different wavelengths and appeared mysterious because I could not receive their messages” (P-90). He may be uncertain about other things, but he appears to be absolutely sure about his desire for Anuradha. He simply wants to possess her and monopolize her. But a careful analysis reveals that his yearning for Anuradha is not motivated by sheer carnal and physical desire for her in infact, goes beyond merely biological, and instinctual gratification. His desire for Anuradha betrays his symbolic quest for an enduring relationship that negates ulterior or narcissistic motives and leads to harmonious amalgamation of the selves, for an irrefutable oneness and togetherness. His longing nevertheless is intensified and his great expectations are shattered although he posses her physically. His intrinsic cravings remain ignited as ever. Som fails to understand his own problem. Anuradha, however, intelligently touches upon the missing dimension of their relationship. She knows it too well that Som does not want her. She tells him:
"It is not me you want – 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” (P-58-59).

Som’s craze for possessing Anuradha does not diminish, he is drawn towards her irresistibly. He further comments on their relationship: “We possessed each other with singular ferocity, neither willing to loosen the clasp” (P-121). He wants to possess her for fear of loosing her. Yet each meeting, far from cooling his passions, serves only to fuel them. Som describes his physical contact with Anuradha:

“I lived on the nourishment of the shades thrown by her naked body under the chromatic shower” (P-121-22).

Som is unable to forget Anuradha. She becomes indispensable to him. Spiritually he remains hungry. This spiritual vacuum makes him lonely and alienated. He goes to Gargi for help. Gargi writes on the pad the cure for ills: “God will send someone to help you... Someone who has known suffering” (P-118) meaning Anuradha. Som asks Gargi again: “But what if there is no God?” (P-118). Gargi’s answer does not satisfy him. In order to possess Anuradha completely, Som takes her to the mountains. In the temple on mountains everybody is cured by God. She tells Som that God will cure him. But she cannot diagnose the disease of Som. He understands looking through the eyes of Anuradha that he is a
leper like the ones lined up on the hill. He thinks, he needs treatment. But he does not want a cure suggested by Anuradha. It is his arrogance and stubbornness that does not let him to overcome his ailment. She knows that Som is suffering from an inexplicable vacuum and void in his life. She too does not know exactly his ailment. But she wants to cure him. Som an incorrigible person does not want to be indebted by her. So he does not yield to Anuradha’s suggestion of his cure.

Som does not want to stay in Benaras. He forces Anuradha to go with him to Bombay. Anuradha is willing to accompany Som to Bombay because she loves him (she had already rejected such offer earlier). At this crucial moment Som suffers from a massive heart attack but survives miraculously. He however, is shocked to learn that Anuradha has gone back to Benaras. Som requests her to come back to him but she simply ignores Som’s telephonic requests to return to him. Geeta informs him that Anuradha has written to her everything about her relation with him and has decided not to meet him again. Som feels ditched and disappointed. Anuradha, in fact, is another example of alienated and dispossessed characters that beset Arun Joshi’s fictional world. Many a time, the kind of character Anuradha is distinguishes Arun Joshi’s art of characterization and his predominant occupation with themes of alienation and dispossession. Her acute suffering and the situational cul-de-sac she is placed in juxtaposes her with the naturalistic characters that of Thomas Hardy and many a character of American fiction written during the great depression era. Arun Joshi delineates Anuradha in the
style of naturalist. Right from her childhood she typifies the essentials of a naturalistic character goaded and governed by movement, milieu and heredity. Even her mother is no exception. Life of Anuradha is a sad commentary of an illegitimate child. Her insane mother sang for others in the evening. She did not marry anybody as she believed that she was married to Krishna. Anuradha’s name was Meera then. After her mother’s death (she was murdered by one of her lovers) her aunt brought her to Bombay. Anuradha was molested in her childhood. Hers is a life of untold suffering, of nightmarish experiences that have scarred, not only her body but also her mind. This revelation does not deter Som to change his mind. He determined to avenge her for ditching him. He is still under the illusion that after promising to stay in Bombay with him, Anuradha turns back her promise. Exploited and shattered, Anuradha seeks an enduring bond, a kind of selfless relationship with Som. But it remains a dream never to be realized as Som is ultimately a man who himself is fragmented. His vision of lasting personal relationship is fractured. Delusion and disappointed he has no faith in the kind of relationship Anuradha is looking for. His constant engagement with the contradictory realities with values life has turned him into a hard man. His response to Anuradha’s yearning’s therefore another fatal blow to a person who is seeking a way out of chaos, disorder and isolation. Quite against Anuradha’s expectations Som leaves out no possibility to gratify his own desire for vengeance. In utter frustration he decides to take revenge on Anuradha and Aftab. He buys all the shares of Aftab and traces through detectives those shares which his father had gifted to
Anuradha. He ignores the advice of his physician K not to hound 
Anuradha because she has suffered too much:

"I know enough. 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?" (P-190).

Journey to mountains brings Som near to his soul, the essence of 
human existence. Som, apparently seems gradually coming out of reason 
into the clarity of faith. At the shrine Som meets Gargi. Som introduces 
K to Gargi, he tells Gargi that K saved his life from fatal heart attack. But 
what K tells to Gargi, leaves Som stunned. K frankly tells that he has not 
saved Som. Som was almost dead when Anuradha came to see him in the 
hospital. Anuradha telephoned K that from Som’s sick-bed she had 
gone to Gargi and requested her to save Som. When Gargi told her that 
she could not perform a miracle, Anuradha persisted, begged, wept and 
threatened. She said that she could not live without Som and would 
commit suicide if anything happened to him. K asks Gargi:

"I am a medical doctor. I do not believe in things in which 
Anuradha believes. But I know for a fact that Som had no 
chance whatsoever and I want to know: did you save him? 
Anuradha says you did. And in return for what you did, 
she says, you made her promise that she should give up
Som. Forever that to her, Som would be dead either way.

Is this true? Please tell me” (P-206).

Gargi does not answer but only smiles.

Som is shocked with K’s revelation. He cannot understand Gargi’s silence. He is unable to understand whether Anuradha has, in fact saved his life. Gargi is unwilling to give any explanation. Som is doubtful about the whole story of K:

“Here was this package, I could take it or leave it. She was going to offer me neither explanation nor advice. I had the confused feeling that I was being put on a hook and she was going to do nothing to get me off” (P-207).

Som realizes that no external system can resolve his dilemma that he has to solve it by himself. This realisation is the result of his journey to the hills.

In the morning Som goes to Lal Haveli. To his utter shock and dismay he learns that Anuradha disappeared. She had gone to the Krishna temple on the night of Janamashtami but did not return. He reports to police which makes thorough search of Aftab’s house but cannot find her. His dilemma remains unresolved. In utter desperation he makes an appeal to Anuradha:
"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" (P-222-23).

This intense outcry of Som suggests that Anuradha is "the core of his existence, the crystallization of the meaning of his life" (14). Anuradha has an intuitive strength. Som describes her:

"She looked much older, older than me and Aftab, not so much physically as by her demeanour, by the look in her eyes. 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" (P-58).

She suffered as a child and as a woman. These sufferings have brought an understanding in her, she can feel for one and all. Aftab remarks about her: "It is just that she can't stand to see anybody fail. It breaks her heart" (P-39). She is mistress of Aftab and sleeps with Som. She loves all.
She is not married to anybody. She offers Som her body when he craves for it. She is not interested in sex but in spirit. She is an embodiment of sacrifice. In order to save the life of Som she is ready to give him up. She makes the greatest sacrifice by disappearing from Lal Haveli only to save Som.

In the novel Som’s dilemma remains unresolved. Som possesses an analytical mind, an altogether a non-believing mind. He is always guided by reason and logic, and remains almost always at war with himself. He says about his problems:

“If I believed in God I could pray, may be run a rosary through my fingers. But that is out. Sitting around, I get into arguments: with living and with the dead, with myself. And I have had enough of the world’s arguments” (P-10).

His scepticism and rationalism aggravate his problems and all his life he suffers from discontent, restlessness and alienation. H.M.Prasad rightly sums the crisis of Som:

“Bhaskar’s crisis is not a crisis of emotion or ethics it is a crisis of consciousness. The march of human evolution and the development of civilization down the ages have brought the modern man to a point of consciousness where he can neither believe nor refuse to believe... Bhaskar is
continuity in his anguish of alienation in his existential problem... Bhaskar’s dilemma lies deep down in his own self and consciousness. It is not the outer world, the objective reality but the world within, the subjective reality which is essentially the fountain-spring of despair and anxiety” (15).

The Last Labyrinth describes Som Bhaskar’s dilemma and it does not provide any resolution. The difference between two worlds - the world of science and rationalism and that of mystery, faith and transcendentalism remain separated till the end. Som’s failure lays in his intellectual arrogance, his excessive reliance on reason and his conviction that science and logic can solve the problems of life. Som’s way of life is different from that of his mother and his wife. Their way of life is faith. It is different from that of Anuradha which is suffering. His way of life is stubborn, rationalism, expediency and disbelief that results in anxiety and ineluctable pressures of alienation and dispossession. Som is deprived of a comprehensive vision of life because he has never experienced suffering like Anuradha or Aftab. Arun Joshi holds the view that “it is very difficult to steer one’s way through life without God, or at least concepts like right or wrong” (16). He believes suffering as means of self-realization and liberation of the self. The protagonists of his first three novels overcame their predicament and arrived at an affirmative knowledge of life and the world through immense suffering and, sometimes, through encounter with death. Som Bhaskar devoid of such
suffering is lost in introspective solitude. His solitude instead of yielding fruitful results in terms of reconciliation with his own self and society, leads him to the horrors of isolation and loneliness. And his introspection enhances his confusion and discontentment. And consequently we find that the life he has lived is a life of illusions of indecision and negation. Sanjay Narasimhaiah rightly observes:

“A study of Som’s character shows that introspection itself is not enough unless there is strength of mind to fiercely alter one’s thinking and being. It can be an indulgence too, for when one expects him to suffer and learn he gives himself to defiance” (17).

The themes of alienation and dispossession have been progressive right from Arun Joshi’s first novel. Sindi depends on his philosophy of non-involvement. He slowly learns that real detachment lies in involvement, unlike Billy Biswas who opts out of the modern world in a bid to seek his communion with the primitive world. Ratan lives in the modern world and seeks fulfilment in serving others in the humblest form as in the symbolic act of shoe-shining. Ratan’s sense of alienation makes him understand that a combination of humanism and religion can be the saving grace of mankind that is steeped in corruption. The progression of alienation has not occurred in The Last Labyrinth. Arun Joshi confirms that:
"alienation of characters in the novels which I have written so far ultimately leads them back to community. I realized that in my latest novel *The Last Labyrinth*, for the first time this does not happen" (18).

But the novel clearly suggests ways through which Som can come out of his ego-centric isolation and resolve his spiritual dilemma. His alienation and dispossession are due to his wavering, his obstinate refusal to sacrifice his rational approach and intellectual pride and his failure to accept the beliefs of his community.
References:


