The Last Labyrinth

Arun Joshi’s magnum opus, *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), that won India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982, is still considered one of the most important books in the area of Indian English fiction. It is yet another attempt of Joshi to delve deep into the heart of the individual who searches for the thing he does not know - solace and/or redemption. Khushwant Singh reviews the novel as “splendid, serious, disturbing, lyrical and irresistibly readable- a fascinating exploration into the turbulent inner world of a successful urban India” (Online). Set in the world of mystery and the darkness of human emotions, it resembles his earlier novels discussed in foregoing chapters but differs at philosophical standpoint. Like Joshi’s other works it deals with the turbulent inner world of Som Bhaskar, the narrator-protagonist who is also a millionaire and foreign educated Indian like Sindi Oberai and Billy Biswas of *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* respectively. But the sharp contradiction from philosophical perspective is that the novelist has reflected the predicament of those unbelievers who do not find any metaphysical control beyond this material world. Arun Joshi again takes a recourse to India and especially the Hindu view of life to provide solution and affirmation to his protagonists who think that merely ‘to know’ and ‘to possess’ can help to solve the mystery of human existence. Sahitya Akademi cites the novel as:

… an outstanding contribution to Indian English literature for its restless search for a meaning in human existence, its treatment of the multiple levels of reality, challenging narrative technique and an evocative use of language. (Online).

Commenting upon the main thrust of his earlier novels, Arun Joshi observes:
The first three, to me seem concerned generally about questions of identity and, probably ethics. The protagonists feel truncated, unfulfilled in some way. There is a withdrawal from the world, then a return to it, the process making them somehow more whole. (Joshi, 1982:2)

Like his earlier works, this novel is another reflection of the senselessness of the world we live in and the individual who is ‘thrown’ in this maze of life to live along with his "hunger of the body, hunger of the spirit (Joshi: 2013, 9)”. Arun Joshi’s existential vision becomes clearer and he seems to insist upon the realization of the eternal self that leads to emancipation from all the anguishes of life. The novel turns into a spiritual autobiography of a soul lost into the labyrinth of the world seeking the way to exit. In its synthetic vision of Indian philosophy, this work sums up Arun Joshi’s existential views with greater intensity and from the perspective of changing pattern of individual relationships and experiences.

In this work, alienation, anxiety and absurdity born out of the impact of occidental learning, finally annihilate into oriental faith. The novel provides a unique forum where many opposing forces - namely, faith and doubt, science and religion, illusion and reality, God and death etc are yoked together in order to analyze the complexities of human being. The meaning behind hero's name 'Som Bhaskar' is also based upon this dichotomy which denotes two opposing qualities of the moon (Som) and the sun (Bhaskar). Accordingly, the warp and weft of the novel is woven out of the confrontation of various opposing forces that we find in its protagonist.

The internal and external conflict has been presented through Joshi’s earlier artistic flair of narrator-protagonist technique in first person narrative point of view. The hero Som Bhaskar narrates his confession in flashback how he was confused in understanding the difference between 'being' and 'having' and this has
made his life a void which later on resulted in his endless pursuit of mystical 'wanting' which further increased his fornications and turned him into a womanizer. As the story reveals, Som Bhasker has everything that is needed to lead a luxurious life - wealth, loving wife and children and above all, millionaire at twenty five, a rare thing, yet he is relentlessly driven by his undefined 'hunger of the body' and 'hunger of the spirit'. His rational mind assumes this 'wanting' as 'having' or 'possessing' and he seeks it by possession of an object, a business enterprise and another man's woman named Anuradha who becomes the centre of his existence and his real shakti. He is, therefore, curious to know the secret by his objective approach which does not solve his dilemma but aggravates instead and he continues to suffer in the mystic hollow of the empty and void world. He thinks:

If only one knew what one wanted? Or maybe, to know was what I wanted. To know. Just that. No more. No less. This then, was a labyrinth, too, this going forward and backward and sideways of the mind. I felt again the faint stirrings of a curiosity that I had first felt near the marble sarcophagus, a secret curiosity that I dare not share with another. (48)

His curiosity is an attempt to come out of the maze but he goes deeper as he wants to get up. The story continues amid this inferring and denying uncertainty from beginning till end. The dichotomy of being has made Som Bhasker a mentally shattered and morally degenerated man, devoid of purpose and groped around in the dismal voids of the world possessing a "Pascilian passion to know and perhaps, to believe but he cannot believe and torn between doubts, he walks tight rope between life and death, illusion and reality, body and spirit" (Rekha & Beniwal: 50).

This schism becomes apparent when Som's dilemma is analyzed in congruence with his psychological inheritance that his lineage has endowed him.
He is a man of double inheritance. His grandfather writes the novelist "was a man-about-town, a gourmet, fond of women and drink. He had mistresses among the young starlets." (143) His father was "a scientist and had delved more deeply into truths that lie at the heart of the universe. He knows things beyond anything grandfather could imagine. (148)". Som has inherited the traits of both, the womanizing and material pursuits of his grandfather and the scientific temperament of his father to seek for the first cause from "whence and how arose the universe (142)". Although his father has suggested him out of his experiences that "science cannot solve the problem of the causes" (112), yet nothing has interested Som "more than the secrets of the universe (117)". Under this double inheritance, he does not conceive the existence that cannot be known or logically proved. Truth for him is only empirical because "evidence is of course important (27)".

The counterpart of Som's personality was outlined by his maternal inheritance. His grandmother, his mother and even his wife Geeta follow the same way. They have faith in God. His mother was a staunch believer in Krishna and flashed the pills down the toilet in her belief that Krishna will cure her cancer but "Krishna sat on top of her bureau and smiled and smiled, and smiled until she was dead (51)". This helplessness of Krishna had undesirable effect on his juvenile mind and shattered his faith, not only in that stone-hearted Krishna, but also in everything that seems only as a matter of faith whether it is God or any other thing like that.

Som's suffering is more aggravated when he begins his education in two cultures. Born in India and brought up under a religious mother, he imbibes religious faith and spiritual learning. During his study abroad, he comes into contact with the western way of thinking. Consequently, his belief in direct reason, practical wisdom and the scientific attitude goes sharper which is again
strengthened by his father when he returns to India. Thus, he possesses a baffled personality devoid of faith and rest in mind. His life becomes a ‘rudderless boat being tossed on turbulent waves’ horrified by "going forward and backward and sideways of the mind (48)". In order to settle himself and in search of the final answers to his wanting wishes, he turns in a compulsive fornicator and runs to different women to satisfy himself. Every affair fizzles out living him alone and puzzled and he fails to find out the true path. He finds himself a mist everywhere. He reminisces:

I was a womanizer all right and boozer, but my womanizing and boozing had not settled anything. I had inherited the affliction of both of them-for what were they if not afflictions, afflictions that had let me into unbearable entanglements. A year ago, although battered, I was getting by fairly reasonably.(144)

In this way, the hereditary traits and the social atmosphere make Som a split personality, split at many levels.

In spite of his happy marriage with Geeta, a loving wife, Som has ‘little fornications’. To understand the cause, he consults a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist suggests him a lot of things but the more important thing he tells Som is that his problems existed beyond and above the realm of psychology. He admits open heartedly:

You know Mr Bhaskar, psychiatry doesn't allow certain approaches to problems like yours. The fact, however, remain that such problems existed much before the advent of psychiatry. Certain approaches were devised at the time. (66)
Som is still puzzled. The psychiatrist convinces him to realize an entity beyond the realm of psychology and which may be a subject of religion. He tells Som the truth:

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...Religion would not have been so successful if such higher goal did not exist. (67)

The psychiatrist shows him the correct path but Som’s rational mind is not ready to accept because "one has to find a proof of the existence of souls (67)". He has questions still: "but what if nothing like a soul at all existed? What if nothing existed that could not be reasoned through as old Leela insisted (67)"

Som, after being dissatisfied with the psychiatrist, approaches Leela Sabnis, a professor in philosophy and an ‘emancipator’ of women. She is well-versed in the psychology of human behavior. Som indulges with Leela Sabnis hoping that she will analyze and resolve his delusions but Leela is also surprised to see that a man of such success and intelligence is also confused. Leela tries to analyze Som, as she could cure everything through her ‘cool analysis’ and for sometimes, Som gets solace in her company but in long term, it also seems futile. She echoes the psychiatrist when she calls him a "neurotic's compulsive fornicator... always playing game with the world". She also condemns him for his persistence and not allowing his conscience to accept the truth. She tells him: "you are lonely on the one hand. On the other, you have built a shell around yourself. To protect yourself (72)". In turn, Som gets bored in the company of this 'muddled creature', who
provides him everything that a woman can, but her discussions provide no deterrent to his illusions. The cause of Som's problem, according to Leela, was because of his separation from the world of the matter and of the spirit but in Som’s words: "In the world of matter we had fed on sex and now we were satiated. In the world of the spirit we still enjoyed conversation. The two worlds, by her lights, did not meet, could not meet (74)". For Som "Leela was a scholar and she explained but she did not much care for them. Descartes and Tantras did not mix (48)". Som badly needed "something, somebody, and somewhere in which the two worlds combined (74)"

Som, still a ‘millionaire of thirty five’ returns to Delhi and meets Anuradha in a reception party which was organized by her live-in-partner Aftab Rai (whose company Som wants to acquire) in an international Hotel. Aftab, according to Mr Thapar, Som's business manager, is a man of peculiar and secretive sort of personality. His partner Anuradha has a very charming personality and she casts a spell on the mind of Som Bhaskar who, hypnotized by some unknown mystic powers in her, begins to neglect his family and runs after her. He says "I stared at her not quite understanding what was happening to me. At thirty five, I was worn-out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling. What, then, was this? (P11-12)". In her spell he could not reject their invitation to visit the dargah. Som is conscious that he is going to be a fly in their relationship, yet he intends to purchase the shares of Aftab and Anuradha which was an effective way to possess her. He frequently visits Lal Haveli at Benaras where Anuradha lives. In her company and the mystic Lal Haveli, Som learns a lot of things and his experiences with the labyrinth of life go more widen. Som's inexorable pursuit of Anuradha engulfs him in voids again because he craves for but cannot properly acquire her although he has possessed her physically and this leads him towards not only endless self questioning but also to the brink of mental and physical collapse and it
adds further dimension to the meaning of life, love, God and Death; the greatest mystery of the labyrinth of life.

Lal Haveli, where Aftab and Anuradha live, carries a different meaning in the life of Som. It presents the maze of the world where every individual like Som is engulfed in. Aftab Rai is the owner of the Haveli who descends from a Nawab family and lives in this Haveli with his partner Anuradha and a singer called Azizun. Aftab has been presented by the novelist as an embodiment of oriental culture and his nature is in sharp contrast with that of Som. He lives with Anuradha but does not want to possess her. They live for each other; an opportunity for Som to realize his true self and learn something from their life so far as sensual and spiritual purposes are concerned.

Anuradha has seen many ups and downs in her life as an "illegitimate child, insane mother, no home, molested as a child, witness to murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world "(175), yet she is "gifted with a special vision, a vintage point high above the earth, from where she could see the melee below an ordinary man could not (126)". She has faith and love in God. She embodies another world contrary to the rationalism of Som Bhaskar. She rebuffs Som: "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 "(55). Their relationship provides a proper space to analyze the juxtaposition between two opposing thoughts, cultures and beliefs as well as two diametrically opposite life forces. Anuradha is Som's final anchor of life and helps him to realize his identity. His yearning for Anuradha is his yearning for self realization. Arun Joshi has presented Anuradha as the shakti of Som who leads him from ignorance to knowledge and enlightens to look into the matter of things.

The remaining works of Anuradha are done by Gargi to whom Som meets at Benaras. She was a deaf-dumb sadhvi who lives in Benaras on the secret bank of
Ganga. Her father was a Sufi, a pir who lived with Aftab's father. Anuradha says: "He gave Aftab whatever sight he has" (54). The mystic world represented by these women is beyond Som's understanding. He feels himself "drawn helplessly into the labyrinth of their mysterious world (54)". They present before Som how to live for human welfare and happiness. In their company, the skeptical and rational attitude of Som is pierced through and through and the mysterious Benaras and its Lal Haveli add further dimensions to mystery and leave him completely baffled and helpless. His rational mind finds no meaning out of these experiences. He considers this to be a creation of his hallucination, a "fragment of an overheated imagination, a vapor, like that little cloud beyond his window, crossing the face of the midnight moon (25)". These increase his purposelessness which springs from his inability to meet the world of the matter and the world of the spirit. All these denote that there is a God and it confounds him but his rational mind has no evidence to rely upon. He decides to leave Benaras forever because it bores him. He says: "Benaras, Aftab, Anuradha, their Haveli-all were bores, frogs stuck in their ancient marshy wells. What I wanted, I decided, was to go abroad, get the hell away from this land of obsessions". (103)

In order to get over his 'one-shot obsession ', Som goes abroad with his wife Geeta whom he marries three month after his father's death. She is all a wife should be: "an intelligent person, sophisticated, aware of the pitfalls of the world (57)" and above all, she has a natural trust in Som like "birds fly, like fish swim"(57). Som accepts:

Geeta, of course, is a great, big giver herself. As big as they came Between Anuradha and her it must have been love at first sight. If discontent is my trademark, trust is Geeta's...It was this trust of hers- in me, in life- that had drawn me...It enveloped her, this trust, like the amniotic fluid envelops the embryo, protecting her slim
shanks and tender white arms. It was stamped on her swimming suit, so modest amidst the grossness that lay about. (57)

Geeta never complains against Som's fornications and he also cannot imagine his life without Geeta. He plans tour with her to forget all these obsessions with Anuradha, Aftab, his Haveli and Benaras but this is not over. The spell of Anuradha still trails him. Inside him, "there was nothing but an empty roaring, like the roar of the sea in a conch." (105) Fed up of this restlessness, he returns to Bombay again and to start a "new chain of enquiries" (105), he approaches Gargi at Benaras. Gargi finds Som in extreme helpless situations and consoles him by writing on her pad "God will send someone to help you... someone who has known suffering ". (107)

Som comes to know about Aftab's not being well. Anuradha asks Som to have a night stay in Haveli but he refuses. Gargi writes to Som "Go with her...don't quarrel. She is your shakti (110)". From this point Som gets a moral boost to indulge with Anuradha and he has frequent visits to Lal Haveli. Like other women in his life, he possesses Anuradha physically yet his hunger does not relieve and he is far away from peace and affirmation. His hunger of the body is more aggravated. On the other hand, Anuradha is fed up from Som but she has no way out. She suggests Som: "there is a God up there... In those mountains... There is a temple there. On a hill lined with lepers. You must come with me...God will cure you.(115)". Som is confused: "Cure me of what? A bad heart? Fears? Disappointment? (115)". But deep inside his heart Som knows that he is a leper and he needs cure. Anuradha tries to console him and helps him to overcome but the egoist Som is ravaged by an insane desire to possess her and ignores her efforts to help him cure his spiritual malaise.
Som is still haunted by the mysterious questions like "whence and how arose the universe...arose whence comes this creation? Only that God who sees in highest heaven; He only knows whence came this universe (142)". But he must have valid proof. He even doubts Darwin's theory of evolution. He asks Gargi:

The point is that the Spirit is there. And if it is there, if man has inherited it, then what is he to do with it? In other words, what precisely is expected of him, of you and me, of Anuradha, of everyone else? Darwin didn't say how we are supposed to evolve further. (120)

Anuradha tries to ease his questions, "may be Krishna begins where Darwin left off" (90). But Som cannot digest the remark as he is devoid of faith. On the contrary, he begins to think that all these incoherent ideas are outcome of the city atmosphere; hence elimination of Krishna and such other unbelievable things is necessary to possess Anuradha completely:

It was this city, diseased and bankrupt, wallowing in filth and humbug, it was this city of perversions that stood between me and Anuradha. Until I broke her from its spell, I should never succeed in completely possessing her. (124)

He insists Anuradha to join him at Bombay. At first, she refuses but she yields at last to Som's wishes because she does not want to see him in pain and depression. Their affair is at its climatic point and his life as Som also realizes, is about to take a turn. But he had never expected such turn.

Som has a massive heart attack leaving no hope of recovery. Anuradha whose purpose of life is to be of help to somebody, prays to God and tells Gargi also to do something. Gargi agrees to do something only if Anuradha is ready to leave Som forever. It is like a fire-test for Anuradha but she sacrifices and agrees
to go away from Som's life. Som gets recovered and he comes to know that Anuradha was also present at that bad time. Now he decides to go to Benaras but his family doctor forbids him. He tries to have a talk with Anuradha, but she does not talk to him as she had promised Gargi for not doing so. Som does not understand this sudden change in Anuradha's behavior and tells everything to Geeta, his wife. Som is surprised to know that Anuradha has intimated their relations to Geeta through a confessional letter and she has also assured Geeta that she will not come in their married life again. Neither Geeta nor Som understand the spiritual mystery and Som makes a sizzling noise supposing that it is Aftab behind their break in relation and decides to wreak his vengeance on them by ruining their business completely.

All that concerned me was that they had made me a fine fool of me, made me look like a dunce... They were not going to get away with it, though. Not by a long shot. I was going to settle the score sooner than they thought (136)

The cogitations have embarrassed him and he feels his futility of being: "How people's lives run smoothly, successfully for years and then they do something unusual, take a wrong turn, make a stupid decision and everything goes to pieces"(158). He buys all the shares of Aftab and to retrieve those shares that Anuradha has received from Aftab's father and subsequently has transferred to the temple, Som proceeds to the temple situated above the mountains. Doctor K suggests sending Mr. Thaper there but Som refuses saying that he "wants to meet Krishna personally (159)"

Som's journey to the mountains proves his journey "from agnosticism to an affirmation of faith"(Mathur, 425) leading towards self-realization and brings elusive experience to him but he fails to search any meaning. On the way he meets
with various people such as a boy with yellow flower and corduroy cap which is an indication of improvement. He detects in the boy an intuitive wisdom or what can be termed as a tough reasonableness that is a characteristic of very elderly people who have seen life and learns to accept the divine order of living. He has no question but only faith upon whatever he has learnt from his grandmother. Som's existential problem is heightened by the fact that life does not offer him any simple solution as it is available to this boy. The simplicity of the boy is a perfect counter to Som. As such, both of them quest for their desired objects, but the difference is that Som is rational, the boy has faith, Som is possessive, the boy is submissive; consequently Som is restless, the boy is at peace. Again, Som encounters an old man who has travelled "nine hundred miles to die near the lake" (177). These are the symbols of Som's encounter with the spiritual world and the world of faith, which have teased him throughout his life. The individuals who meet him on his way are not well educated like him but only due to their strong faith, they live a more peaceful life than this multimillionaire Som Bhaskar. These happenings provide an enigma to him and conclusion that it is only faith that can eliminate the fear of death from one's mind as in the case of Som’s mother and further, this old man. Remaining works are done by Vasudev, the priest who confirms Som that "faith can move mountains, doctor sahib... Modern people know so much more than we who have never stepped out of the village" (182-183).

When they reach their destination, Som is surprised to see Gargi at the shrine. He introduces K to Gargi, "This is Dr Kashyap, He saved my life (187)". The miraculous survival of Som from heart attack is unraveled when Dr Kashyap accepts: "I did not save Som... In fact by my understanding he was as good as dead when Anuradha came to see him the evening of his attack. This is important" (189). Gargi reveals to Dr Kashyap about Anuradha's persistence and begging her
for Som’s life saying “your father had given Aftab his eyesight so why you could not save Som’s life (189). Kashyap asks Gargi with more intensity:

I am a medical doctor. I do not believe in the things in which Anuradha believe. 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 would give up Som. Forever. That to her, Som would be dead, either way. Is this true? Please tell me. (190)

Gargi does not answer him. Then K asks her about the packet of shares that Anuradha has left with her jewellery and which, Some, "this foolish man is hunting for (190)". This time Gargi accepts to have a package and she hands over this package to Som next morning. Som is much confused when Dr. K tells him how Anuradha and Gargi have snatched him away from the mouth of death. Confused Som tells Gargi that he can do without those shares but he must have a reason to do so. He seeks Gargi's advice who suggests him "there is no harm in believing that God exists "(197). Som still doubts because for him "He does not exist. It is more convenient that way "(197). He still needs a proof: "No, don't misunderstand me. I want to know. Probably, I want to believe. But one can't order belief. I must have evidence. You see what I mean? "(197). Gargi laughs and writes at her pad " God does not work in that simple manner, God does not seek revenge...Man's vanity (ahankar) brings him revenge enough (197)". Even then, Som says to Gargi : I am curious. I want to know. May be over-curious but not vain." Gargi writes an eloquent sentence: "we are all children trying to reach up a crack in the door to peep into the room (197)". As usual, Som is unable to seek response in the language of Krishna which Gargi is believed to represent. His muddled mind fails to differentiate the simple meaning of 'knowing' and 'realizing'. He wants to 'know' God, not to 'realize' it which is impossible. He
disagrees with Gargi and decides not to give up Anuradha on these 'flimsy grounds'. He returns from temple.

The words of Gargi have shocked Som and compelled him to retrospect. While downing the stares he has a sensation as though the package was going to explode any minute. In his mind he was seeking for the meaning of what Gargi has told him:

I wished she had elaborated. I wished she had *told* me what lay in the room. Maybe she did not know herself. Maybe, it was better she did not tell me. Maybe I would not have believed even if she had told me. One had probably to rise up to crack by oneself. (198)

Som reaches Lal Haveli to inform Aftab that he has brought all the shares of his company. Aftab says him to leave him alone with Anuradha as they like each other. Aftab reprimands Som of his emptiness of understanding. He asks Som:

'So you have our company,' Aftab said.
'Yes.'
'And you want Anuradha now?'
'Yes.'
You learnt nothing in your mountains.'
'Is that a question?'
'No.'

Aftab begins to sob and bids good night to Som. Later on Som meets Anuradha and forces her to go with him because anything could happen to her. Anuradha also urges Som to go out from their life. Next day Som reaches the Haveli and Aftab informs him that Anuradha has not returned from the temple where she had gone last night to celebrate *janmashatami*. Police fails to trace her. He receives a letter from Aftab cursing Som that he has betrayed him like a backstabber. This shatters Som through and through. The question of life and death
keeps on haunting and he is once again left alone in the labyrinth of the inscrutable world "like an ant threading through a maze, knocking about, against one wall, then another (48)". He is defeated from his life. He could neither crack the mystery of Anuradha nor resolve his existential dilemma about God and death. He still wallows in agony and fails to sublimate any form of his desire ranging from animalistic to the spiritual. This marks the shift from hopelessness to helplessness. In his immense depression, he remembers God and makes a fervent appeal to Anuradha to pray for him:

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 heat? Does He understands the language that we speak? Anuradha, if there is a God and if you have meet 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. Please for me, Anuradha. He will listen to you.

When the novel ends, Som, amidst his faith and doubt, having and possessing, makes a suicidal attempt but Geeta saves him and shakes him "gently as though rousing a man from sleep” (206). The novel ends leaving Som with his wife Geeta.

The analysis of the above story makes clear that Arun Joshi has finally sheltered in Indian philosophy to render a way to affirmation for existential problem of his protagonist. The fabric of the novel presents before us a world of "Kafkasequen labyrinth with a dead end or a place where wisdom is veiled by senses which delude and bewilder the embodied soul (Mathur, 425-28 ) (cf. Geeta 2.72,3.40). The central pursuit is the hunger of the body and the hunger of the soul
and these two pursuits have been yoked together in the novel. Prof. O.P. Mathur comments:

These two pursuits come in the novel giving it a central duality around which a number of other dualities and contrasts revolve: the Som of the past and the present, Som and Aftab, Som and Anuradha, Benaras and Bombay, Lal Haveli and the great Himalayas and above all, the maze of doubting and questioning and a steady faith, symbolized by the bright flame burning in the remote temple and embodied in the planned death of the old man who has travelled....(425-28)

Som, a multimillionaire is representative of those modernized beings who may have gained the world but have lost their souls, their spiritual and cultural moorings. His refusal to take anything for granted without concrete evidence is not indigenous but something imported. It is linked up with his Western education of which Som, like his father, is a product. In an interview with Sujatha Mathai, Arun Joshi confirms: "Cartesian rationalism is artificial in India, where people grow up in a more integrative sense, and is grafted on to our educational system"(8). Som is a westernized Indian who is devoid of faith in the religious beliefs of his community. With his spiritual homelessness and loss of faith, he is given to pragmatism and rationalism which in turn lead him to an impasse of intellectual doubt and anxiety. Though there can be no doubt about the genuineness of his search but he seeks to solve the metaphysical questions through a method that challenges the very existence of transcendental reality. He tries to know God through reason, books and discussions. But he reaches nowhere while his anxiety and unrest become sharper. In return, he suffers from uncertainty, indecision and intellectual doubt. He lacks empathized understanding of Anuradha that makes her connect with the sufferings of the other. Further, his rationality and skepticism
keep him away from his own soil and to follow that faith represented by Anuradha and Gargi which results in agony and alienation.

Arun Joshi elucidates that the intellectual pride of modern man is the root cause of his sufferings. His excessive reliance on reason and his conviction that science and logic are enough to solve the fundamental questions of being; is his great failure. Rational Som is "incapable of spontaneous feeling (12)" and fails to accept the basic fact of trust which is the hallmark of his own wife Geeta. Reason itself is not sufficient for survival. Som is sure that his problems will be solved only if he gains knowledge. But there is something fundamentally wrong with the means he uses to acquire this knowledge. He has "tried to know God through reason and argument without apprehending the fact that this rationalistic attitude is hopelessly inadequate before the question of metaphysical magnitude he encounters" (Ghose , 146). In fact, God is not a matter of intellect or logic and for many reasons he is above both. If the mind rejects him, the heart will crave for. Som, on the one hand rejects God and any such thing yet his heart desires to know the "secrets of the universe" (117). He tries to convince Gargi: "I want to assure you I am not vain. I am not arrogant. I am curious. I want to know. May be over-curious but not vain" (197).

Life's problem is a Maya or mystery of the transcendent reality and it cannot be comprehended by logical investigations. It is to be experienced by a direct intuition and by wisdom that only suffering can give. Man is often alone and helpless at this planet. In the sparkling moments of life, the troubled mind longs for such a loving heart who may himself appears from somewhere to bestow love upon him, sooth him and support him. In the most difficult situations of life, if any easiest and most spontaneous imagination comes to the mind, it will certainly be none but the omnipresent and omnipotent God, the last hope, support and strength.
Even if it is a deception, it is acceptable. The over rational attitude like Som is only a foolish attempt. Aftab tells Som:

That is what you think. I told you, you are different. You don't understand us. You work by logic. By your brain. You are proud of your education or what you consider education. There is an understanding that only suffering and humiliation bring... You are empty of understanding (200)

In fact Som is empty of understanding because reason and faith are the two different aspects of the same coin. The intellect is operated by our logical mind and faith arises from the innermost reality of our heart. Furthermore, these two parts have been created by the same creator whether we designate Him as God or Nature. Reason is an acute genre of intellect. Its distinguished functioning can be used in understanding only those objects which may involve our sensory organs. To understand that subject which is beyond our senses, the rational interpretation cannot help us; however it may protect us to avoid superstitions so that the individual may realize the true nature of God. Albert Einstein writes:

Scientific research can reduce superstition by encouraging people to think and view things in terms of cause and effect. Certain it is that a conviction, akin to religious feeling, of the rationality and intelligibility of the world lies behind all scientific work of a higher order... This firm belief, a belief bound up with a deep feeling, in a superior mind that reveals itself in the world of experience, represents my conception of God. (Ideas and Opinions, 262)

Even the scientists do not escape by merely saying that God is not a matter of science but they ponder over this issue and try their best to understand the true nature of God. Som also says:
I knew that money was dirt, a whore. So were houses, cars, carpets. I knew of Krishna, of the lines he had spoken: of Buddha, at Sarnath, under the full moon of July, setting in motion the wheel of righteousness; of Pascal, on whom I did paper at Harvard: Let us weigh the gain and loss in wagering that God is, let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all, if you lose, you lose nothing. All this I knew and much else. And yet, at the age of thirty five, I could do no better that produce the same rusty cry: I want. I want. (9)

Som like any other scientist does not agree only with that form or nature of the Almighty which is usually assumed by the common folk. In that form of God accepted by people, he finds only a tradesman who runs the cosmic business of give and take for his own benefits and who can be pleased by offerings and prayers. He has seen that God smiling and smiling and his mother died of cancer. In fact, this form of God has been created by primitive man to overcome his fear because it is fear that evokes religious notions - fear of hunger, wild beasts, sickness and death. Since at this stage of existence when understanding of causal connections was poorly developed or undeveloped, the human mind created some illusory beings more or less analogous to itself on whose wills and actions these fearful happenings depend and they tried to secure the favour of these beings by carrying out actions and offering sacrifices which, according to the tradition handed down from generation to generation till the modern man.

Such type of God at least to an intellectual like Som is not acceptable. He says:

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
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 (165)

Like the scientists, Som is longing for that Supreme Being who is above all taboo and who is creator, operator and the destroyer of the whole cosmos. He searches for that super ruler who is not only the controllers of all regulations but a source of these regulations too. For him, “God is like having a third king in a game of chess” (153). The old sages have named him as Parbrahma but any appropriate scientific term for Him is still unavailable. Intellectually, we can only guess that God is such a human concept who is helpful to understand the mysteries of the world but Himself remains indescribable. He is only a subject of trust and commitment.

Som is empty of understanding since he is devoid of faith and tries to know the indescribable God on rational basis which is essentially futile. God, simply exists because we realize it, we demand for it in the uttermost situations of our life as he is the ultimate hope and support for our life. The renowned scientist Albert Einstein wrote:

A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms—it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man. (The World as I See It, 14)

Som also gets affirmation when he accepts this meaning of religion and faith. His affirmation lies not merely in turning the attitude towards the transcendent reality but the purgation of doubt and the wanting desires are his real
emancipation. His problem was not his curiosity and scientific attitude but it was his doubt. He is non-religious only in the sense that he has doubt in his mind. In fact science needs individuals like Som who are filled with curiosity for truth. This feeling and curiosity grows from the soil of religion. The very purpose of religion is to emancipate the individual from self motives, inclinations and fears. Commenting upon the true nature of religion Einstein observes:

Accordingly a religious person is devout in the sense that he has no doubt of the significance of those super-personal objects and goals which neither require nor are capable of rational foundation ... In this sense religion is the age-old endeavor of mankind to become clearly and completely conscious of these values and goals and constantly to strengthen and extend their effect... For science can only ascertain what is, but not what should be. (The Religion of Science, 1-4)

Arun Joshi, through the character of Som Bhasker, seems to support a religious scientific attitude towards life to disentangle the puzzle of existential problems and come out of the maze of life. Doubt has no place here. The realization of God needs surrender, sacrifice and strong will to change one's mind and accept the reality. Introspection itself is not enough unless there is strength in mind to fiercely alter one's mind, thinking and the existential conditions. Rational attitude regarding the being of individual is also necessary only to avoid blind faith and superstition. Som's gradual development to realize this fact of life becomes the substance of the novel. The labyrinth of the life can be resolved through faith, trust and open hearted prayer to God and the acceptance of his order. Som's problem is that he is constantly longing for satisfaction but he fails to identify that it is spiritual rather than the material phenomena that he is searching for. Changing of
relationships and pursuit of different women can satisfy only the hunger of the body, never the spirit.

In this way what comes out from the forgoing analysis is that, lack of faith results in doubt which further characterizes into rejection of self reliance and lack of inner strength. Som has all these caricatures one by one. He cannot take any decision, despite his realization that one has to find the way alone. This weakness has been especially outlined by the novelist with reference to the teachings of sage Yajnavalkya. According to the sayings of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, King Janak asks: "And when the sun is set, Yajnavalkya and the moon is also set, and the fire sunk down and voice is silent, what, then, is the light of man ? (143) The sage answers (not mentioned in the novel) : " The self indeed, is the light,' said he,' for with the self, indeed, as the light, one sits, moves about, does one's work and returns." (Brihdaranyak, Ch.3, Br.6). This self is the light of every individual and there is nothing to know except this 'self' of the individual mind. Prayer and worship are individual modes to purify his very 'self'. Som quotes Kierkegaard that "prayer does not change God... but it changes him who prays"(108), but he does not want to be guided by his self and selects reason instead. Packed by doubt and inner convulsions and lacking of self-discipline and stability of mind, he refuses to yield ground. In the very thick of miracles and intimations of the other world, he cannot sacrifice his reason and built-in skepticism. Consequently he is left with a vision of life that represents labyrinth.

To conclude, we can say that Som's problems and sufferings are born of his lack of pure understanding. He fails to differentiate what is spiritually attainable and what should be rationally proved. In a sense he is a samshayatma (doubting Thomas) and Gita says shamsayatma Vinashyati (who is of doubting nature, perishes) ( Gita, 4.40). Radhakrishnan observes:
But the man who is ignorant, who has no faith, who is of a doubting nature, perishes. For the doubting soul, there is neither this world nor the world beyond nor any happiness... We must have a positive basis for life, an unwavering faith which stands the test of life. (172)

Arun Joshi’s view seems to support the above sayings of the Gita. His other characters in the fiction have been arranged in order to prove this quest of the ultimate reality of life through the parallels and opposites. Characters pitted against Som highlight his inner confusion, vacillation and skepticism by their placidity of mind, composure and inherent faith in life and divinity. Som's mother, his wife Geeta, Anuradha, Aftab, Gargi are more or less Som's opposites. His father and Leela Sabnis are his parallels, suffering from confusion, doubts and uncertainties, which are the products of their logical approach to life and reality. These are used by the novelist to highlight some of the besetting problems of our time, problems like skepticism, hedonism, loss of faith, anguish of spiritual doubt and spiritual homelessness that westernized Indians suffer from. Som's opposites are basically from Indian soil and under the impact of Indian thinking, they have clear understanding and realization of the realities of spiritual life hence they are happy even in their sufferings which are solely because of their qualitatively different attitude towards life. Although they are not highly educated like Som, but they are internally enlightened that has replaced doubt from faith. If we carry a study from cultural standpoint, they represent oriental philosophy and especially Hindu view of life. The boy and the old man who encounter Som on his way to the mountain are another such examples. They provide a chance to introspect through a matrix of experiences by presenting the contrast between the West and the East within one man, i.e. the protagonist of the novel.
In this way, *The last labyrinth* has a religious background that confirms that affirmation of human existence is possible only by following the path of *Dharma*. The logical approach to reality can only help us to avoid superstition. The novelist stresses the need to balance rationalism and faith by breaking out the vicious circles of self seeking pride and obstinate rationalism and to find meaning and purpose of life as well as faith in one's cultural and religious moorings. This can be achieved only after passing through knowledge of human sufferings and spiritual commitment and self realization. In this way, Arun Joshi’s ultimate existential vision is based upon the study of human self because *atmaiva hyatmano bandhuratmaiva ripuratmanah* i.e. "self alone is the friend of the self and self alone is the enemy of the self" (Gita, Ch. VI v.5).

Arun Joshi echoes Indian Philosophy which has preserved its vital links with the situation of man and its interest in the place that he may occupy in the universe. He has advocated for uttermost devotion to the self to overcome the problems of the individual. Self realization is the only way to the eternal happiness and liberation from the labyrinth of life. Religion is a matter of conviction and over skepticism- as the story demonstrates, leads to miserable and tormented life. As Som Bhaskar is arisen from sleep by Geeta, his trustworthy wife, this is an attempt by the novelist to awake the reader from the labyrinth, the *Maya* and to short his way out through the realization of the self. The Gita is still there to torch a right path to action, to knowledge, and to devotion.
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