Arun Joshi is one of the few India novelists in English who have successfully revealed subtleties and complexities of contemporary Indian writers. He has produced very compelling works of fiction. Sensitively alive to the predicament of modern man, Joshi has ably delineated unfortunate consequences of the absence of values and faith in life. In fact, he has been rarely excelled in exerted by the complex character and demands of the society in which modern man is doomed to live. This awareness of man's rootlessness and the consequential anxiety is the keynote of Joshi’s unique vision of the plight of modern man; His novels delineate human problems rather than issues arising out of ephemeral loyalties. Joshi marks a definite departure from the general run of Indian novelists in English and his experimentations in themes and technique have added new dimensions to the art of the novel. He is one of those modern Indian novelists in English who have broken new grounds. In his search for new themes, he has renounced the larger world in favor of the inner man and has engaged himself in search for the essence of human living. An outstanding novelist of human predicament; he has chartered in all his five novels the inner crisis of the modern man.
The most besetting problem that man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. As Edmund Fuller remarks, in our age "man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem ... a conviction of isolation, randomness, (and) meaninglessness in his way of existence." The problem of meaninglessness is so pervasive that it threatens to flake every sphere of human life. It has been treated in considerable detail in American and European literature. Its treatment by Indian novelists like Joshi is no less interesting.

Man fails to perceive today the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. Notwithstanding unprecedented scientific and technological advancements, which have added immensely to his physical pleasures and comforts, the contemporary man is doomed to find himself in a tragic mass. The prevailing economic conditions culminating in the abject poverty of the masses and the economic squeeze of the middle class on the one hand, and the economic affluence of the newly rich on the other, the drag of social conventions and traditions, the fast-changing value system consequent upon the impact of rapid modernization accruing from industrialization and urbanization, the inter-generational tensions engendered with changing ethos—all these make increasing and often disturbing demands on the individual and contribute in their won ways to his sense of meaninglessness of life.
As it is, the contemporary man finds himself participating in a rat-race and is estranged not only from his fellowmen but also from his innermost nature, having nothing within or without him to fall back upon in moments of crisis. The present century has seen the dissolution of old certainties and dogmas and as Paul Brunson observes: "Never before were so many people plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement". 3 Deprived of the Succour of ancient wisdom, which provided the much-needed basis for value and meaningfulness in life, the modern man has no substitute for faith and religion except science and information. Thinkers like Aldous Huxley have aptly pointed out that "ours is a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays". 4

The potential meaninglessness of human existence has corroded human life from various quarters. The existential encounter with nothingness and the tenuousness of human existence are prototypical of modern life. The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the hard reality of what he achieves, between what he professes and what he practices, and between what he really is and what he would like to appear, has mercilessly crumpled his life leaving an insidious effect on his inner being. The injuries inflicted and the scars left on his psyche generate a cynical attitude towards the established social norms and values and make him grope for life's relevance. Man is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and that there are forces, which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes. He
comes to feel helpless in the fundamental sense that he cannot control what he is able to foresee.

The pervasive sense of meaninglessness is thus the most dominant feature of the human condition in the contemporary epoch. It is the realization of what Frank Johnson calls "Fractionated functions",⁵ that is responsible for one's felt insignificance of life and its affairs. Seeman has discussed the plight of the modern man under a set of five inter-related operational conditions, viz. powerlessness, formlessness, isolation, self-estrangement and meaninglessness, which he considers to be different manifestations of alienation. He analyzes "the search for meaning" in terms of the increase of "substantial rationality".⁶ As functional rationality increases, there is a parallel decline in the individual's capacity to act intelligently in a given situation on the basis of one's own insight into the interrelations of events. This state of affairs is most likely to generate feelings of authenticity and meaninglessness.

No emotional problem is more threatening today than the pervasive sense of meaninglessness? Conditions in India, though not so alarming as in the Western World, have begun to take a dismal turn. Victor Anant has discussed the moral confusion of modern Indians who live on "an ad-hoc basis" in "a no-man's land of values." Here are two sets of customs and torn asunder by a dual code of behavior, they live lazily by opportunism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy and wit," and are, consequently," sucked into a shuffling, sleep-walking mass," always dreaming of "walking up in some cloud-cuckoo
land of bliss." This, according to Anant, is due to their "moral inertia and flabbiness," which has given them "all the grandeur and all the emptiness of hypnotized people".  

Certain recent Indian novelists in English have made significant efforts to delineate the predicament of the modern man. Joshi's novels in particular read like the spiritual odyssey of the twentieth century man who has lost his spiritual moorings. Despite some differences in their approach, all of Joshi's heroes are "men engaged in the meaning of life." The novelist has tried to project through their experiences the crisis of the urbanized and highly industrialized modern civilization along with its dehumanizing impact on the individual who is ever eager to find out and reaffirm the value of meaningful relatedness in life.

**THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT IN ‘THE FOREIGNER’ (1968),**

This novel explores in depth the problems of Sindi Oberoi. It has been remarked: "A strange feeling of aloneness and aloofness ... permeates the entire narrative and provides the necessary texture and structure to the novel". In her review of the novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee describes the hero of ‘The Foreigner’ as "a perennial outsider". Sindi is always lonely and ill at ease in the world in which he has to live. He belongs to no country, no people and regards himself as "an uprooted young man living (aimlessly) in the latter
half of the twentieth century." (195) 

His loneliness is apparent to anyone who meets and talks to him. In their very first encounter, June tells him:

There is something strange about you, you know.
Something distant. I'd guess that when people are
With you they don't feel like they're with a human being. May be it's and Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner everywhere.  

Sindi is trapped in his own loneliness, which is accentuated by his withdrawal from the society around him. He wonders:

In what way, if any, did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window? Somebody had begotten me without a purpose, and so far I had lived without a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter! It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. (61)

At a deeper level, this novel can be viewed as attempt to plumb man's perennial dilemmas. It is about things that Sindi wants—the courage to be and the capacity to love. His alienation is of the soul and not of geography. As he himself confides, his "foreignness" lies "within" him and drives him from crisis to crisis rendering it difficult for him to leave "himself" behind wherever he goes. (61) Right from the beginning, he is oppressed by a desire to find" the meaning of life." He himself wants "to do something meaningful." (14)
While gathering miscellaneous experience in life, however, he becomes conscience of the impermanence of things. He says to June: "Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important." (107) His entire life is geared around his quest for permanence in life. When they have been together for some time, June suggests that they get married. But he tells her: "We are alone, both you and I. That is the problem. And our aloneness must be resolved from within." (126) He argues with himself on the meaning of life and its affairs. Debating on the necessity of marriage, he comes to the conclusion:

Marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People got married just as they bought new cars. And then they gobbled each other up. (67)

All acts like marriage have no significance for him. He has feels that "even if he loved her (June) and she loved him it would mean nothing, that one could depend on". His deep involvement in a married woman named Kathy, whom he loves with "the piercing, all-caressing love of an adolescent," (122) and the subsequent separation make him realize that "all love – whether of things or persons, or oneself – was illusion and all pain sprang form this illusion."(170)

In his eagerness to find out the meaning of life, Sindi lives "in a strange world of intense pleasure and almost equality intense pain." (82) But he fails
to make a satisfactory progress and, as he himself tells us, his twenty-five years are "largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places." (92) His soul becomes a "battlefield where the child and the adult warred constantly." (130).

Sindi's sufferings are manifestations of a spiritual crisis, which all sensitive people have to face today. His position is that of "the dull school boy who always gets stuck with the same unanswerable questions." (138) He wants peace, a capacity to love and the courage to live "without desire and attachment." (138) Above all, he wants to conquer pain" and death, which "wipes out everything" leaving only "a big mocking hero." (107) His various experiences in life, however, leave him with unanswered questions "like swollen carcasses strewn on river bank after a flood. "He is keen on knowing his "purpose" in life, knowledge of which is essential before he can make earnest efforts to "fulfill" it. (138) All his attempts in this regard, however, fizzle out "like an ill-packed cracker." (139) He squanders away the meager quarto of happiness given to him. He feels always being pushed "on the giant wheel, going round and round, waiting for the fall." (85)

The "pathlessness" of the road to New York reminds Sindi of his own pathlessness. He also remembers the lines from a popular song, which runs: "Who knows Where the road will lead? Only a fool can say." He becomes conscious of the fact that for no less than twenty years he himself "had moved whichever way life had led" him. (196) He compares his meaningless
existence to that of "an idiot without a keeper." (163) Fully convinced of "the abominable absurdity of the world" (191) and "tired of living," he even contemplates suicide. (165) He does not "fit in "in the world and his way of life becomes intolerable."In a way," says he, it has been "like a small death." (104) He becomes consequently "cynical and exhausted, grown old before (his) time, weary with (his) own loneliness." (152) He can compare his way of life only to walking "around the huge circle like a sleep-walker in an amphitheatre." (208) Of his condition after Babu's death, he remarks:

It suddenly struck me that something had been knocked out of me. I was just not the same person anymore.... I felt as if there was nothing left that I could depend upon.... I felt like a desert of like a vast field of naked oaks in wintertime. I felt more alone and naked in the world than I had ever felt before. (174-75)

Sindi is critical of the ultra-modern mechanized society in which he is "considered quite a misfit." (15) Before "the abominable wheel of industrialization," he feels driven "like torn bits of paper on a windy day." (43) The strain of adjustment on him proves intolerable. The emptiness that surrounds him leaves him "completely dazed" or in "just one long coma." It was, he observes, "as if somebody had given me a big dose of anesthesia." (141) The feeling of his nakedness in the hands of existence grew every passing day. He felt some "abominable hands groping and probing" into his soul, "ripping dry scars open and dipping into old wounds." (48) He begins to
question Mrs. Blyth: "And what use have you made of your extra height and extra years? You carry heavier guns and have longer time to make each other unhappy, that's all. Can you call that an achievement?" (102)

He finds America a place for well-fed automatons rushing about in automatic cars," (90) "much too sterilized" and "much too clean and optimistic and empty." (89) He develops apathy for "gray, bedraggled and lonely people" like Mrs. Blyth, who realize pretty late in life that it has "left them by the wayside." (68)

Sindi wants to leave America to escape a bit of himself "that appeared the most decayed." Sindi wants to move on either to Nigeria or to India is the choice and a flip of the coin decides in favor of India. He comes to India hoping that it will provide him "a place to anchor on this lonely planet," (176) but his hopes are belied. He finds India no better than America: "In truth it had remained unchanged. (207) He only has to face here a different set of people with a different set of vanities and "different ways of squeezing happiness out of a mad world." (208) He is appalled by "the stagnant deadness" (207) of the Indian scene dominated by people like Mr. Khemka, "man of the world ... owner of a growing empire." (208)

Amongst young men there are Babu Khemka who represent typical Indian fantasies and illusions about a glamourized foreign dreamland, where they go "to play around with (foreign) girls," (23) "to make American friends" and not "to mix with Indians all the time" because "Indians are so
underdeveloped as compared to them." (91) This life, Sindi himself is convinced, is not going to help him solve his problems. He finds the Hindu "nonsense about idols" (70) and their "mealy-mouthed philosophies" (75) thoroughly useless for his purpose. Explaining his "strangeness," he tells Mr. Khemka:

My set of experiences has taught me a reality that is different from yours." (134) He further remarks: You had a clear-cut system of morality, a caste system that laid down all you had to do. You had a God; you had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. (135-36)

It is this lack of a definite frame of reference and a system of values that is responsible for Sindi's problems. He feels himself stranger in India to both the corrupt rich man and the half-naked struggling labourer. The common people, he finds, "have the benefit of their delusions," which "protect them from the lonely meaninglessness" of life. His existential drifting over the surface of the earth and his experimentation with self only intensify his dismal loneliness and acute sense of meaninglessness of life. He tries to seek, finally, in detachment a solution to his problems.

**THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT IN ‘THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS’ (1971)**
This novel called also aims at delineating the human dilemma. Billy, like Sindi, is in search of a human world of emotional fullness—a world of meaningful relatedness. Billy is aware of the deeper layers of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life. It is significant to note that Van Goth's turbulent career "held considerable fascination for Billy at one time." (13) Billy's expression itself is symptomatic of "a mixture of nearly all those emotions that one tends to associate with a great predicament." (43-44) "No other man" than him, we are told, "so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end." (8) Renouncing his past, his family and the everyday world, the rich, sophisticated and U.S. educated Billy goes in search of the meaning of life. The novel probes into his "dark mossy labyrinths of his soul that languish for ever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun." (8)

As a student in America, Billy is less interested in books on anthropology than in the places described in them. He would like to learn with real interest and absorption about "the aboriginalness of the world" (14) and it is "around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized." (14) He has the first glimpse of "the other side" of his personality at a music "session," which keeps on exerting "a mesmeric pull" on him. (18, 21) Soon he finds himself "itching to be back" to a congenial atmosphere. (27) His itch for India is an itch for realization and for the relevance of life.
On returning to India, however, he feels like a fish out of water and sees no other way out but to fly from the civilized, sophisticated modern society. He makes a trip to the tribal wilderness—"the vast emptiness of central India" (19) and vanishes into the saal forests for the Maikala Hills with a view to leading the life of a tribal and carving for his soul an inner shrine of peace and happiness.

Even before his physical disappearance into the jungles, Billy ceased to belong to the world. He felt being impelled by "a great force, aircraft ... a primitive force." (23) His Swedish friend Tuula had long ago sensed this primitive force in him. Even at the age of fourteen, while staying in Bhubaneshwar, he received the intimations of his primitive self: "It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake." (122) "Something has gone wrong with my life," he realized. "This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of." At that time, however, he was notable to understand the source and the precise nature of this call. He says:

I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going? (122)

In America, too, at the age of twenty, he had visions "of being in a place other than where I was, in a place, very old, at times a wilderness, at other times full of strange primitive people." (150) What makes the story of Billy
fascinating and convincing is the wonderful coalescence of his rational outlook with his aircraft that triggers off the creative energy in him, prompting him to do what he does. The following extract from one of his letters to Tuula expresses his innermost feelings:

When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells of the forest. The curious feeling trails me everywhere that I am a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big City and not the other way round. (92).

Billy's experience just before he takes the momentous decision to make the final departure into the jungle on the second day of his expedition has mystic undertones and reminds us of Siddhartha's renunciation of his wife and child. Billy felt as if "the inheritors of the cosmic night" (121) were "waiting and walking and staring" at him and he was the first man on earth faces the earth's first night." (119) His departure is a prelude to an arduous quest for something beyond himself. It is not an escape from life and its realities but an escape from what he considers to be the "real" life, far from the madding crowd and the sordid, meaningless existence in the civilized world. It is in the primitive tribal life that he finds his own fulfillment and the essence of human existence. According to him, the very quintessence of the primitive force, he feels that he has "suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than a poor reflection of a million other." (142)
Billy does not find meaning of life either in White America or in the upper class Indian society. He tells Romi that he decided to live in Harlem because "that was the most human place he could find" and that "White America was much too civilized for him." (9) He hates likewise "the upper class of Indian society" (9) which he himself comes from, for he finds it swarming with pompous and mixed up people: "Artistically, they are as dry as dust. Intellectually they could do no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the west abandoned a generation ago." (197)

Billy never feels at home in the sophisticated world. He finds something basically wrong with it because it is "hung on this peg of money." (97) He has got boundless appreciation for Tuula for treating money for what is worth: "a whole lot of paper." (177) He often wonders, "Whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money." (96) He is terribly unhappy when he finds himself "tied up in knot by a stifling system of expectations" of this mundane world", (127) squandering "the priceless treasure of his life on that heap of tinsel that passes for civilization." (141)

The ways of the upper class sophisticated society seem to Billy in no way different from those of kennel of dogs "yawning or struggling against each other." He wonders, "Whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does the civilized man do?" (96) The "bizarre unintelligibility of Billy's word" (222) is pitted against "the bright glossy face of urban society" and its "tawdry nick-necks of civilization." (217)
Meena, Billy’s wife, represents the ambition and superficiality of the modern phoney society. Meena and Billy are not made for each other. It is her lack of understanding that lands Billy to the edge of despair culminating, subsequently, in the seduction of Rima Kaul:

It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul was taking revenge on me for having denied it for so longs that Other Thing that it had been clamoring for. (189)

The terrible shock he feels at his degradation provokes his flight from meaningless civilized world. His alternatives are crystallized. He has two “clear choices”-either to “follow this call of the primitive, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay.” (190)

Billy is thus “a refugee from civilization.” (140) The tenacity with which he pursues his quest in “an incoherent and meaningless world” is really astounding. Billy withdraws from the civilized world because it begins to make inroads into his own character. He remembers that all his life he had been confusedly driving towards his real self. (116) He recapitulates:

I certainly underwent a deep metamorphosis that was, no doubt, responsible for all that I did subsequently. Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling. (121)

Joshi’s novel, incidentally, reminds us of D. H. Lawrence’s ‘The Woman Who Rode Away’ and Graham Greene’s ‘A Burnt Out Case.’ Billy’s strange
The novel's theme is the search for meaning in life, evident in the following dialogue between Billy and Romi:

I don't want to sound too pompous, old chap.
Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end. Of course I realized it only after I ran away.
I realized that I was seeking something else. I am still seeking something else.
What is that?
He seemed to be thinking.
God? (Romi) prompted.
There, there, old chap, that is too big a world.
Something like that?
Yes, Something likes that. (189)

The novelist presents Billy's search for meaning, however, is conducted in a very hostile atmosphere and he has to pay a heavy price for it. The sophisticated society in its "middle-class mediocrity," makes it a point to bracket men like him with "irresponsible fools and common criminals" and does all that is possible to prevent them from "seeking much meager accomplishment of their destiny as their tortured lives allowed." (231-32) Efforts to bring Billy back to civilization by capturing him by Police force only lead to the final tragedy. He pays with his life for not conforming to the norms.
of the urban civilization – for daring “to step out of its stifling confines” and, as
the novelist concludes, "the strange case of Billy Biswas had been disposed
of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows its rebels, its seers, its
true lovers." (240)

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT IN ‘THE APPRENTICE’ (1974)

This novel also depicts, though less exhaustively, the plight of the
contemporary man, who is "sailing about in a confused society without norms,
without direction, without even perhaps, a purpose." (74) The protagonist,
Ratan Rathor, comes of an impoverished middle-class family. He has to find
his own way and pay his own price in this world. He is the child of a double
inheritance. His father was patriotic and courageous, but his mother was
endowed with worldly wisdom. She often reminded Ratan:

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 a law unto
itself. (20)

Torn by these two conflicting philosophies of life. Ratan finds it
extremely difficult from the very beginning to live smoothly in the "petrified and
frozen" world of civilization. He has no other way but to keep up appearances
and do away with the world of ordinary decencies. He naturally, faces tension
and resentment precisely because he has to put up with totally divergent
social norm and expectations. He is convinced that life is characterized by chaos, absurdity, brutality, disorganization and insensitivity. Faced with the dehumanizing materialism of today an unfortunately circumstanced person like Ratan who is endowed with a heightened sensibility, feels crushed under the growing weight of meaninglessness and isolation from his innermost nature and surroundings. Ratan's humiliating experiences of job-hunting make him realize the cruelty of the human lot. He himself becomes "at the age of twenty-one, a hypocrite and a liar, in short, a sham." (28) As a clerk he works "harder than almost anybody in the department except the Superintendent himself". (37) Ratan is nevertheless always haunted by the morbid fear of losing his job and suffers from a keen desire on getting promotion and an intense preoccupation with work. He is almost invariably in a high strung mental condition, which threatens to ravage his soul and deprive him of his personality and identity. Ultimately he succumbs inescapably to the needs of his job and rewarded with security and promotion, ends up by accepting a bribe when he least needs money. (61)

Ratan undergoes thus a profound change. The man who grew violent and rebellious even at the thought of "careers and bourgeois filth," (41) becomes in due course "a thick-sin and washout." (41) While he tries to seek "solace from the annals of corruption," (112) his dying conscience keeps on pricing him. At every stage he puts up an initial resistance only to discover the futility of his efforts. He sums up the problem of people like him as follows:
No one seemed to be sure whether what right was practicable. That was where the rub lay. In the practicability of things. The was where I saw the best of them buckle. Because very often the best did not have the daring or the greed of the charlatans. Thus the charlatans won. And when saw the charlatans winning the best become even less sure of themselves. And at times they turned charlatans. (64)

The Whole business of living in a muddle confuses him all the more and he fails to differentiate between right and wrong:

The feeling generated in me a great confusion. What had I done, what had I done which I should not have done? What was wrong? What was the measure for doing things or not doing them? (72-73)

Ratan's dilemma is typical of an average product of this highly sophisticated civilization. With a troubled conscience Ratan goes from place to place without finding any peace or solace. He confesses to Himmat Singh:

There is a terrible sensation... the realization that one's life has been a total waste, a great mistake; without purpose, without results. There are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. All else, thoughts or revenge, of pleasure, of pain, pale before, it are made pointless. (140)
Ratan is keeping on finding out the purpose of life and all its activities. But he takes almost a time to free himself from the shackles of the valueless urban civilization. In his eagerness, he visits temple to derive courage from the world of religion. To his horror, however, he discovers that even religion is not free from corruption; it is corrupt and can hardly be expected to provide any solutions to various problems of this meaningless world. He is shaken out of his moral inertia when he sees the faceless head of his friend, the Brigadier. He tries to restore his mental peace by undergoing, finally, the most difficult penance in the world; every mooring on his way to the office, he wipes off outside the temple the shoes of the congregation.

**THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT IN ‘THE LAST LABYRINTH’**

This is Joshi’s Sahitya Akademi Award winner novel, probe into the turbulent inner world of an industrialist, Som Bhaskar, who becomes a millionaire at the age of thirty. He is married a woman of his choice, who has borne him two children and is “all that a wife could be, "yet he" goofed it all up” (40) and is relentlessly driven by undefined hungers. Amidst intriguing juxtapositions, the novel plunges into a haunting world of life, love, God and Death, the greatest of all mysteries-- “the last labyrinth.” With its spiritual and sensuous dimensions interwoven, it is a story of deeper seeking through love. The novel raises some pertinent questions about life and its meaning and tries to unravel the still unresolved mysteries of God and Death.
Right from the beginning, Som realizes that he has "become a nuisance" and that has been fooling around "like a clown performing before a looking glass." (10) He is constantly tormented by a great roaring hollowness inside his soul and "the boredom and the fed-upends" resulting from his variegated experiences". (21) His "orchestras of discontent" (12) are, in fact, so frighteningly ceaseless that at the age of thirty-five he becomes "a worn-out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling." (14) He always in hurry "like a hare chased by unseen hounds." (12) In his own estimation, he is "wondering, curious, analyzing, correlating, (but) getting nowhere." (80) He once said to Anuradha:

"I'll tell you what is wrong.... I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus. There is something sitting right in front of me and I cannot see it. (107)
He feels as though struck by thunder, he bled totally of all energy, and that inside him "there was nothing but an empty roaring, like the roar of the sea in a conch." (115) He is always "dizzy, off-balance" and suffers from vague fears, which have nothing to do with his body or his nerves. (152) His infictions plunge him into "a bottomless pit of despair, like a shipwrecked sailor sinking into the ocean." (144)

The root cause of Som's problems is that he is relentlessly chased by undefined hungers. He is always haunted by mysterious voice:
Audible only to my ears, a gray cry threshed the night air: I want. I want. Thorough the light of my days and the blackness of my nights and the disquiet of those sleepless hours ... I had sung the same strident song: I want. I want. I want (11)

He tries to quench his ravaging desires by possession of an object, a business enterprises and a woman named Anuradha of indeterminate age and origin, tall, handsome and tender. He remembers:

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 ... Later, it become more confused ... A world spinning all by itself. (189)

Anuradha, who knew him so well, explains the reasons of his unhappiness and dissatisfaction. She says "You don't know what is wrong and you don't know what you want." (106) Leela Sabnis thinks that his troubles originate from his habit of "always playing games with the world." She tells him bluntly: "You are lonely on the one hand. On the other, you have built a shell around yourself ... You are bored, still in your little shell. That is the long and short of it." (80)

Som's troubles get multiplied not only because of "the terrible loneliness" of his heart (23) but also because of his awareness of the lack of relevance in life. He finds the world meaningless. As a student he was upset
by futile activities of life and begged the Headmaster's wife "to explain the meaning of it at all." (24) Later he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complications—"a labyrinth within the labyrinths: (29) like the lanes of Benaras. He calls life "vanity of vanities," (32) which could be compared only to "meaningless flights of stairs" (34) or "a fisherman's net." (37) Summarizing his opinion about life, Som remarks: "Nothing was straightforward. One was always running a hurdle race." (133) He would like to know whether there was a mystery about life into which everything fitted properly. (161)

As a consequence of his grim experiences in life, Som develops "a new loathing for the squalid world." (46) He is disgusted with the people and himself. He maintains: "It is the voids of the world, more than its objects, that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without." (47) And on Manikarnika in Benaras, he finds "voids with a bang. Both within and without...Voids all." (48)

Som rushes about in search of happiness and meaningfulness in life. "How happy I must be, " he exclaims, "to have no problems in life." (98) But life is teeming with troubles and pains, which are all the more keenly felt by sensitive people. The greatest dilemma of human life is its ultimate reality, i.e. death. Like his father, Som is vexed by the mere thought of it. He says: "There was nothing I loathed more that I loathed the sight of death." (15) He wants to know its secret "without nagging, enervating doubts." (53) If death is to wind
up all, what is the point in running madly with outstretched arms in pursuit of "little pleasures" or "little vendettas" of life! (65)

Som is urged on by a keen desire to know the meaning of life. But he fails to make any headway in this regard. The world remains to him "a mysterious world, as pretentious and meaningless as the holy bulls of Benaras." (108) He tries his best to have a peep into its mystery. His interest in its secrets is genuine. As he says: "Nothing had interested me more than the secrets of the universe." (129) He continues:

Why should there be this turn to evolution? Why should Man be equipped, burdened with this strange ... this strange sensibility, or urge of drive? Is it by chance? Or, is there a meaning to it? (131)

The question about life and death continue to haunt him throughout his life. "And always in various shades of coherence," he confides, "the spoken or unspoken question, life a vulture, circled the corps of my life: what lay in the last labyrinth?" (122) Asked by him as to what lies in the last labyrinth in the Lal Haveli, Aftab replies: "Why, death, of course." (37) Som would also like to know where one went after this life:

Was this it, then the terminus, the last of the labyrinth? ... Was it this that I had wanted all my life? Was this answer to the relentless chant "I want, I want." Why was it so unsatisfying? Or, may be, the labyrinth hadn't ended. Something else lay ahead, something more fundamental than a miracle. (211)
Som could not find any satisfactory answer to his questions. Being a highly rational person, he would not accept any readymade solution to his problem, such as irrational belief in supernatural elements or blind adherence to fatalism or determinism. His father, a chemist turned into businessman, emphasized, "The fundamental unity in the construction of the universe" and maintained, "everything happens in cycles. Birth, Growth, Decline and Death." (27) He wondered if there could not possible be a First Cause behind the creation of the universe, which he regarded to be "the expression of a will, "though he had no evidence to believe that there was a divine will. (204) He was, subsequently, pushed off to the edge of melancholia by these "bigger interrogations" and knowledge of verities sparsely known among ordinary men."(156) Som's grandfather, on the contrary, was "reckless, happy, and unburdened by philosophical speculation." (156) Som has no "explanation of life's problems and as an ardent believer in Darwin, feels bogged down when he finds that "Darwin didn't say how we are supposed to evolve further." (132)

Som's search for life's secrets becomes hopelessly complicated because of his yearning to have the best of both the worlds – the world of matter and spirit. He maintains, "What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined. (82) Such wishes are not normally granted and one is in for frustration and disillusionment. Som also suffers in life, as his friend K. puts it, on account of his proneness to
"romanticizing ... blowing things larger than life." (189) Speaking of the unfortunate situation he is trapped in, Som himself observes:

But I was just not myself. That was where the rub lay ... I had sorrows that did not let me breathe ... Then, there was the greatest sorrow of them all – that no one even guessed: There was the sorrow of idleness ... But there was always this bit if me, a large bit, somewhere between the head and the chest, just idling about like a stationary engine, getting involved with nothing. It makes me feel as though I was asleep. This was no joke. In fact it was one of the weirdest things to happen to anybody ... Had it always been like that? Had I always been half asleep? Or, could it be that I once had stable, wakeful life but had gradually lost my bearings? ... If I knew what had put me to sleep I could, perhaps, get rid of it like one got rid of a hangover ... Everything was a haze. Time itself seemed wiped off like the spools of a computer. (109-10)

Som is, naturally, unimpressed by what he calls Gargi's "mumbo-jumbo" (163) or the religious-minded people's "half-assed rigmarole." (208) His obstinate questioning, however, would not solve the riddle of life for him. There is no doubt about his eagerness to know the meaning of life. He says to Gargi: "I want to know. Probably, I want to believe. But one can't order and belief. I must have evidence." (213) His approach is very close to the scientific methods of experimentation and validation. With this approach, however, he does not go an inch nearer the secret of life.
In his desperation, Som even plans to visit temple every evening. He begins, ultimately, to nurture self-pity and, like one who had been completely vanquished by life, utters the terrible death wish. "A peaceful death" – that is all he wants, for he is mercilessly torn apart by his doubts. (164) He is eaten up by his own "strange mad thoughts" (223) and is incapable of paying adequate heed to the world and its normal demands. His flourishing business is reduced to "a big mass." (223) Finally, when he tries to kill himself, he is stopped by Geeta, who shakes him "gently as though rousing a man from sleep." (224) We are given to believe that the unquestioning trust of his intelligent and understanding wife will restore peace to his life.

Thus we can say that Joshi presented the human problems with a new panorama in Indian society. Billy, Ratan, Mr. Khemka, Bimal, Balram, Sindi etc are those human beings who faced the problems of their life. Sivaram Shastri seems to undergo hardly any change. His foundations appear to be solid and authentic. In Joshi's novels the presence of the transcendent emerges by way of discovery while in other novelists is almost as an accomplished state pulsating to authenticate itself through mathematical equation. His protagonists conceived in rich diversity and in their autological best, congregate to proclaim not hosanna but Tat Tvam Asi, that art true.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


11 All textual references to Arun Joshi’s Novels have been given
parenthetically. The following editions have been used: *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The City and The River*, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth*, Oriental Paperbacks Publication Division, New Delhi.