CHAPTER-VI

The Last Labyrinth
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Arun Joshi's fourth novel, The Last Labyrinth (1981), won him the prestigious 1983 Sahitya akademi Award. Regarding to novel, H.M. Prasad observes: "The Last Labyrinth assimilates the existential anxiety, the Karmik principles, the longings for the vitals of life in the mystical urge of Som Bhaskar."¹ Mukteshwar Pandey observes:

It exhibits the confluence of the existentialist anxiety as exemplified in The Foreigner, the "Karmik" principles of 'detachment' and 'action' on the pattern of the Bhagavadgita as shown in The Apprentice, and the ceaseless longing for the essence of life being observed with a latent quest for "a great force, urkraft" as observed in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas. Thus, the confluence of the 'Triveni' in the form of the mystical urge of Som Bhaskar is presented in his incessant longing for the vitals of life and existence.²

The Last Labyrinth is actually a quest for meaning in Life. The narrative, located mainly in Bombay and Benares, is an account of Bhaskar's business deal and love-story running alongside is Bhaskar's crisis of identity.

At one level, The Last Labyrinth is the story of Som Bhaskar, a shrewd Bombay businessman trying to grab a plastic manufacturing company of one Aftab Rai who lives with his pretended wife Amerada in his ancestral Lal Haveli at Benares. At another level, as Tapan Kumar
Ghosh says, It is a story of deeper seeking through love, the spiritual autobiography of a lost soul groping for the meaning of life and death."

Som Bhaskar, the narrator-hero, relates in flashback his infatuation with Anuradha, whom he wants to posse by all means, thus endangering his life and business. His mad pursuit of Anuradha to possess her physically and spiritually results in his quest for the meaning of life, love, God and death.

Som Bhaskar, is a millionaire industrialist of thirty five who inherits a gigantic Plastic manufacturing industry. He had been educated in the world's finest universities at a quarter million expense. This led to his western outlook on life, penchant for materialism and a faith in reason. He is married to Geeta, "an extraordinary woman"\(^4\), who has borne him two children and is "all that a wife could be" (40). Yet he suffers from an insatiable hunger: "Hunger of the body. Hunger of the spirit" (11). He is a millionaire; yet he knew that "money was dirt, a whore. So were houses, cars, carpets" (11). A strange sense of discontent keeps gnawing at his soul resulting in the disruption of his life. Since he was Twenty five, he has been singing the song of discontent: "I want, I want, I want" (11). The discontent leads him to run after the carnal pleasures. Despite having a faithful, intelligent and educated wife and a near impossibility of his life without her, he runs after several women-
ayahs, librarians, nurses, aunts, friends wives and others and develops sexual relations with them, but his hunger remains insatiable as ever. These new experiences ironically lead him to a terrible sense of emptiness-voids within and voids without: “It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without” (47). He is perpetually haunted by “a great roaring hollowness” (25) and “the boredom and the fed-up-ness” (21). The first time he had this feeling of “void” was when he visited the caves of Ajanta at eighteen. Events like death and its sight make Som's consciousness of void the more intensive. Like Camus’s Meursault he betrays no emotions at the news of his mother’s death, but feels the same strange hollowness behind his eyes in the cavities of his skull. Even on the Manikarnika Ghat at Banaras, the sight of funeral pyres, the smell of burning flesh and the sound of bursting bones gave him the same sense of void As Som, says:

You have to have a little incident or get a telephone at midnight about so and so popping off or catch your wife with another man or be told your have cancer to see the voids within (48).

But he doesn’t know the cause of this void and would spend nights without having a wink of sleep: “It I stayed up all night choffing tranquilizers, not knowing why I was awake, and come close to tears because I did not know, it came pretty close to sorrow” (103).
Som tries to fill this void with sex, wealth and fame but, ends up confronting, to use Keats's phrase, “sad satiety” for he has no clue to what he wants:

If only one knew what one wanted, or may be, 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 (55).

Life seems absurd to him and he develops a kind of 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” (46). He is in a haze and is unable to think clearly. As he tells Anuradha: “I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus. Why am I here? Why do I come here? (107). These affictions plunge him into an abyss of despair, like a ship-wrecked sailor sinking into the ocean” (144).

Som is unable to come to terms with the world because he hasn’t been able to come to terms with himself. He wants everything in life—whether it be business shares, or faith in God, or the unfathomable mystery of a woman or “the secret of the universe” (129). He wants to know if there is a mystery in life where everything fits properly. But his rational analytical mind fed on western thought and outlook makes his quest impossible. His logical analysis gives him no clue to his affictions. He is aware that he is “wondering, curious, analyzing, correlating, but
getting nowhere” (80). This failure leads him to bitterness and makes him vindictive towards those who had put him on this planet; and like Hamlet he is led to question the very purpose of life. If death is to terminate all, there is no point in seeking “little pleasures or little vendettas” (65). For him, if life is incomprehensible, death “the last labyrinth” was the most incomprehensible: “And always in various shades of coherence, the spoken or unspoken question, like a vulture, circled the corpse of my life: what lay in the last labyrinth?” (122). Ever since his mother’s death he has been in the grip of this fear-psychosis. Once at a dargah in Delhi, he feels: “There was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death and here, amidst the cenotaphs and the gravestones, there was death with a vengeance. I felt tricked” (15). When Som confides his fear of death to his doctor-friend K, he tells him, “it is not death but life you are bothered about” (203).

Like Hamlet, Som also shrinks from death but has to undergo the absurd exercise of living in the wilderness of these planes. To come to terms with either he tries to comprehend the mystery of life and death through logistics and reasoning, but these mental exercises are rendered meaningless.

But Som Bhaskar is not solely responsible for his peculiar situation. He has inherited, as much from his ancestors as from his age;
heredity and environment both are responsible for his mental make-up. He inherits contrary influences from his parents, with the grand father’s genetic influence remaining uppermost. His Epicurean and hedonistic grand father is:

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 (156).

On the other hand his father is a scientist absorbed in philosophical speculations who wanted to explore “the First Cause”. As Som sys, “He was given to bigger interrogations which he probably carried on during those nights of insomnia” (154) which followed the death of Som’s mother. Thus Som, a child of double inheritance finds himself a misfit everywhere. His painful utterance is a reflection of this:

And where did I fit in? I was a womanizer all right, and a boozzer, 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, affliction that had led me into unbearable entanglement 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 affliction bestowed upon me by my genes: I was in deep trouble. And I knew it (156-57).
Som’s mother is, contrary to Som’s father and grandfather, a religious lady—a woman of profound faith and endurance. She develops cancer, but does not take the pills. She believes that only Lord Krishna would cure her, and finally she dies of cancer. Som says, “She died of cancer and Krishna.” Despite Som’s importune requests to get hospitalized, she doesn’t agree. Nobody could shake her trust in Lord Krishna, who “sat on top of her bureau and smiled and smiled, and smiled until she was dead” (57). After her death he gave himself over to the mystery of life and death and “the First Cause,” “that would explain everything, whose nature might lie behind the nature of all the rest?” (27). He realized science could not give any clue to the riddle of causes, and wondered “If only the mystics could offer, their evidence of God like the scientists do” (27). He even watched through his telescope the never-ending space, but to no avail, Then he turned to philosophy and metaphysics that in turn led him nowhere:

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

The realization that there were no such verities resulted in melancholia and he died: “Wasn't his knowledge, then, a knowledge of
verities sparsely known among ordinary men, that had pushed him over the brink, had convinced him that there were no verities at all” (156).

In the very opening sentence of the novel, Som Bhaskar says, “Above all, I have a score to settle. I forget nothing, forgive no one,” (9) which reminds us of what Dostoevsky’s Underground Man says, “I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased,“5 or, for that matter, the words of Roquentin in Sartre's Nausea, “Something has happened to me. I cannot doubt that any more. It came as an illness does.”6 H.M. Prasad aptly remarks: “From his father he derives a Pascalian inclination to know, and if possible to believe, and the mother impulse goads him to trust, to surrender. Thus, emotionally, Som has become a labyrinth.”7 Som too is aware of the inherent contradictions in his genetic constitution.

To assure himself, Som consults many psychiatrists who “said a lot of things that either made two obvious a sense or no sense at all” (73). At last he gets the explanation to his malaise by an old psychiatrist:

It is possible...to conceive of this world as being populated not with people of flesh and blood, with certain sexual orientations, 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 (74).
This explanation is akin to Jung’s theory of the union of 'animus' and ‘anima’, or the Sankhya philosophy, which talks of the union of "Purush" with "Prakriti." Until this encounter takes place, discontent corrodies away the 'animus.' Som demands a proof of the existence of souls, the psychiatrist denies it him: “We assume certain things 'a priori' in all exercises of logic” (75). But the incorrigible rationalist as he is, he constantly suffers from a facelessness, a blurring of reality. His is a psychological case: “Like Jungian or Pirandellian man, he is full of inner disharmony and is a loose cluster of masks or fragments of identity.”

Leela Sabnis, Som's friend and lover, is “professor, descendent of a long line of professors, M.A. and Ph.D from Michigan, something else from London” (75). She has linguistic talents and is well versed in the thoughts and ideologies of philosophers like Descartes, Freud, Jung, Spinoza and others, but she admires Descartes and Freud most. She has an obsession for explanations. According to her, nothing existed that could not be reasoned through. Som asks her to reason through his malaise, she tells him: “You are much too high strung. without reason. You are neurotic, A compulsive fornicator” (80).

To his problem of discontent and the feeling of void, she attributes to his problem of identity. She says, “Maybe what you want is a mystical
identification, identification with a godhead, as most Hindus want, sooner or later” (113). She prescribes Descartes for his malaise (‘I think, therefore, I am’) asserting that intuition, faith or soul could also be reasoned through. When she affirms that the world of matter and the world of spirit “did not meet, could not meet,” (82) he realizes that Leela wasn’t the person he wanted, and the six-month love affair between the two terminated for good. As he says, “What I needed, perhaps was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined.” But real life rarely offers such vain wishes, and he remains frustrated and disillusioned.

Som is a split personality. He has inherited the sensuality of his grandfather and the spirituality of his father. He craves for somebody in whom the physical and the spiritual worlds meet. It is this craving that made a mess of his married life with Geeta. Although she is sensible and sensitive and all that a wife could be, he remains discontented. During these ten years of her married life she has developed her “own guide book of grief ” (62). She has no complaint, no reproach for Som’s adulteries: “Where she has every right to the adulteries of the body she had only taken to the cleansing of the soul ” (63). Geeta is, like Som’s mother a child of another world, traversing, like a plane at a higher altitude, “a corridor separate from the dark vestibule ” (69) that Sam has crossed.
Though he cannot imagine life without Geeta, like G.V. Desani’s H. Hatter, he remains strangely obsessed with women. Things take a dramatic turn with his encounter with Anuradha.

The novel nodoubt seems to be Som's mad pursuit to possess Anuradha, but this mad pursuit lends metaphysical dimensions to it as he encounters the mysteries of life, death, life and God. Tapan Kumar Ghosh rightly says:

Som’s obsession with Anuradha is one of love, a love that does not liberate him and sublimate his desires, as that love of Bilasila and Billy in The strange Case. It freezes him, as he is egocentric and possessive. Som's hysterical and relentless pursuit of Anuradha is a tortuous affair that brings him face to face with the mysteries of life, death and God, and constitutes what may be called the nucleus of the story. This complex affair in which the sensuous and the spiritual dimensions are interwoven inextricable, unfolds in an intriguing juxtaposition of locales.⁹

Som's first encounter with Anuradha takes place at a meeting of the Plastic Manufactures’ Association at Intercontinental Hotel in Delhi. She appears to him a woman having dark, sexy eyes and “the body of whose grace and sensuousness she seemed unaware” (41). At Aftab's invitation, Som visits him and Anuradha at the Lal Haveli which “had been built as a maze” (34-35). It is here that he comes to know that Anuradha is not married to Aftab and lives with him. She tells him: “I have not married- It is better not to be anybody's wife. You can't marry everyone you love. So
why marry anyone at all? ” (43). On being asked whether or not she would like to get married to someone, she says, “I can imagine I am married to Aftab. I can imagine I am married to you. My mother used to imagine she was married to Lord Krishna” (128). The closer he came to her, the more mysterious she appeared to him.

Anuradha is a woman of obscure origin. Her past is a saga of intense suffering and harrowing experiences that have left an indelible mark not only on her body but also on her soul. She was an illegitimate child of an insane mother had been molested as a child and had to witness, “murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world” (190). She was born in Bihar Sharif in a one-roomed house where her mother sang for strangers in the evening and, perhaps sold her body. Her mother had not married, as she believed she was married to Lord Krishna. After she died (she was murdered by one of her many lovers) Anuradha was brought to Bombay by her aunt. She was sent to a convent but there she undergoes great humiliation. In her utter loneliness “All those years she does not make a single friend. She thinks only of her dead insane mother” (190). After schooling her aunt put her on the screen. Anuradha labored, and her aunt made money. After some success for a year or two, she left the film world and began to live with Aftab in Lal Haveli. It was Gargi, a deaf mute mystic with profound compassion and insight that brought
Anuradha and Aftab together. After a year he almost lost his eyesight and became mentally run down. Anuradha too lost her looks in smallpox and attempted suicide but was miraculously saved by K. Her past is enough to suggest the ineffable suffering and humiliation that she underwent. As K tells Som: “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” (189-190).

Anuradha has inherited an unflagging faith in Lord Krishna, and her miserable past has made her stay detached and composed whatever the circumstances are. Surprisingly enough she does not believe that by loving Som she is being “particularly unfaithful” (134) to him.

Aftab and Anuradha go to a cottage on the bank of Ganga where they meet Gargi, “a fair, rosy woman of about forty” (150). When the three are back from the visit, Aftab goes to sleep. When Anuradha is left alone with Som, she tells him the mystery shrouding Gargi. Gargi’s father was a prince who later turned a Sufi pir. He lived with Aftab’s father and cured Aftab of his losing eyesight. When Anuradha finds him unbelieving, she tells Som: “You are not as clever as you think. You are wrong about many things. you are wrong about yourself. You think you know a lot, when, in fact, you don’t”(61). He tries to make love to her, which annoys her, and 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*" (58-59). She is unable to stand Som for he does not have faith even in her and she pushes him away.

Som is not able to bear Anuradha, cold rather insulting response and decides to meet her in Banaras after many months. In Aftab's Haveli, he is unable to have a sound sleep and is restless. When he wakes up he finds Anuradha standing at his bedside. He lusts madly for her, and is able to have "physical contact". (107) But like Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* she only fuels his passions.

With a view to forgetting her, Som goes on a tour with Geeta to Europe, America and Japan, but to no avail. He goes to Gargi for help. She passes him a note: "God will send someone to help you. Someone who has known suffering"(118). When she further says, "Go with her. Don't quarrel. She is your *shakti*." (121) he realizes for himself that she is indispensable to him. What Bilasia is to Biswas, Anuradha is to Som, like the "anima" of Jung. She is the life-spirit in women, the Feminine principle of the *Sankhya* system of Indian philosophy. It is she who plays a vital role in his realization of self. Anuradha becomes a riddle, a puzzle, a mystery to Som and he thinks that she may have the key to his malaise. He says, "She was like
the ocean; one could never reach the bottom of her" (132). He even confides to K: "There was more to her than met the eye. A world spinning all by itself. I was infatuated with this mysterious world" (189). It is only towards the end of the novel that he comes to realize his own inadequacy in dealing with her. Suffering and humiliation have endowed her with a special vision to see into the heart of things. Som feels her eyes have been forged for carrying out transactions of the soul.

Since Som had become completely infatuated with her, he was now bent upon possessing her completely. Every time he goes to Bombay on his business tour, memories of the enigmatic Anuradha keep haunting him. He keeps shuttling between Bombay and Banares to possess her: "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" (133). Anuradha could have ditched Aftab, for very soon Som was to own everything Aftab owned. But she does not do so. Actually this possessive love of Som proves fatal for both.

If we draw a comparison we find. Where Som is possessive, Aftab is not; where Som is Western, Aftab is oriental. He hails from a zamindar family. His great grand father had been a courtier of Wajid Ali Shah. His family fled to Banares after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. He respects Anuradha's personality and his love is sincere but not possessive. He, too,
like Anuradha, has had his share of grief and suffering and has some of the understanding that Anuradha has and which Som is totally devoid of. And so, like Som, he does not know what he wants, he does not know what to believe in. He being a man-of-the-world fails to understand the mysterious and labyrinthine world of Anuradha, Aftab and Gargi where, as Tapan Kumar Ghosh says, Beauty and horror, life and death, sensuality and spiritual ambience, the dancing girls and the god-woman strangely co-exist. ”10 Lal Haveli is, for Som “the mysterious labyrinth of life and reality.”11 He remains an alien to himself: “But I was just not myself. That was where the rub lay. I spent hours-in the office, at home, amidst the din of parties-struggling with her memory trying to untie the riddle” (109). He is so obsessed with the idea of unraveling the mystery shrouding Anuradha and the labyrinthine Lal Haveli that in dreams and memory it becomes difficult for him to extricate one from the other. His business dwindles, his health declines and his mind becomes dazed. His rational and analytical approach fails to bridge the gap between his own world and the world of Anuradha and Aftab. As Aftab tells Som: “I don't want to discuss, I find it difficult to argue with you... you have such strong ideas. And you hold them so...feverishly” (36).

Anuradha is Som's “Shakti” but the incorrigible sceptic as he is, he is not satisfied with what Gargi says, and he asks her: “But what if there
is no God?” (118). To this she only gives him an enigmatic smile. He does not want to take recourse to faith in God or Krishna, as did her mother, Anuradha and others, as it will be tantamount to a moral and spiritual death. Wherever he goes he finds the presence of God or Krishna-Mother's room, or Banares. He fails to comprehend Anuradha's unswerving devotion to Lord Krishna which appears nothing to him but ridiculous. Equally incomprehensible is the enthusiasm with which hordes of pilgrims swarmed the Krishna temple on the “Janmashtami,” when Anuradha is dressed “as if for a wedding” (126). To Som the entire panorama seems absurd and the enthusiasm misplaced:

Indifferent to the shit under their feet, indifferent to the smell of a thousand bodies, the pilgrims jostled from step to step, ecstasy on their faces, when I would expect disgust. Anuradha was not different. Her face suffused with a strange ecstatic glow, she muttered prayers, made offerings at every possible shrine, thought nothing of the hem if her sari got soaked in dung (135).

Like an alien to himself and the world of enthusiastic pilgrims, he becomes full of jealousy and frustration: “All this preparation, I know was for Krishna” (133). He does not enter the temple on the pretext that it is “too crowded for his taste” (130). In his defiance he looks absurd and silly. He has become jealous of Lord Krishna and Anuradha as well, as she is devoted to Him and not to Som. a degenerate mortal.
Som once carries her to a beautiful valley situated in the shadow of snow-covered hills where there shall be nobody, not even Lord Krishna between the two: "There no one would know her and she would think of none and there would be no one to distract her from her loving of him." (124-25) One evening when the two are drunk, Lord Krishna creeps into their talk:

There is a god up there. In those mountains ........ There is a temple there. On a hill lined with lepers. You must com with me ............ God will cure you." "Cure me of what? A bad heart? Fears? Disappointments?" She said she could not explain. I looked into her drunken eyes and in a way, I understood. Deep inside my heart I know I was a leper that needed a cure. But I refused to yield ground (126).

She suggests love and divine faith as remedy to his deep-rooted malaise at which he becomes enraged for "dragging God into that room which until that moment had been the stage for satisfying his wildest fantasies" (127). And when he again makes love to her it was as if he were making love to a corpse and not to Anuradha, her self or soul remains elusive to Som. His discontent grows the more, and the more strident becomes his chant "I want, I want, I want" (11) which he is unable to reason out smoothly.

Joshi, in his interview with Sujata Mathai has confessed to having been influenced by Camus and other existentialist writers and also
Mahatma Gandhi and the *Bhagavadgita*. Som's confusion results from a contact between the Western and Indian ethos. Godlessness is a common trait of Arun Joshi's protagonists. The symbol of Krishna looms large in the story and the enigmatic elusive Krishna appears and disappears in the novel throughout.

Som, like Trishanku, moves to and fro between the Western and the Indian (or Eastern) world. He is very close to the characters of Beckett and Ionesco-absolutely absurd. Ionesco defines absurd, as "That which is devoid of purpose... cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."\(^{12}\)

Although an ardent follower of Darwin with "survival of the fittest" as his motto, he realizes the inadequacy of this theory of Biological evolution to explain the existence of spirit. Like his father, he too is in search of the first cause. As Joshi says, "The son travels farther perhaps, largely it would appear because of the person of Anuradha. But they travel a similar path even though the path itself keeps turning upon itself."\(^{13}\) He asks Gargi: "Why should Man be equipped, burdened, with this strange... sensibility, or urge or drive?

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"
But he is held in surprise when Anuradha says, “Krishna begins where Darwin left off” (132). Som wants to have faith but is unable to have it for want of a sign or evidence. As H.M. Prasad says:

Som's tormented by his knowledge. Awareness of Spinoza, Freud, Jung, Buddha and Krishna tortures him. Darwin tortments. He has gone through the history of evolution and remembers his Darwin by heart. If Descartes is correct if Freud and Jung and Darwin are correct what should he think of his mother's faith, Geeta's trust?  

On yet another occasion, he asks her to accompany her to Bombay. She loves Som and makes the sacrifice against her wishes. But at this climactic stage of their affair, he suffers a nearly fatal heart attack.

But Som had many more mysterious experiences in store. Despite his doctor-friend K's total disappointment he recovers, and with it Anuradha disappears from his life forever. She refuses to meet Som despite his requests, and comes to know from Geeta that Anuradha had told her everything in writing and had sought her forgiveness by which he feels befooled and betrayed and becomes vindictive.

Now Som is bent upon ruining Aftab completely and thereby having full possession of her. He asks Mr. Thapar, his manager, to start buying the shares of Aftab's company once again, but is surprised to know that a block of Aftab's share is lying with Krishna. He says,
There was nothing simple about Krishna. Had it been so, he would not have survived ten thousand years. He would have died along with the gods of the Pharaohs, the Sumerians, and the Incas. Krishna was about as simple as the labyrinth of Aftab's Haveli. (173).

As Anuradha has sold the shares to Lord Krishna, he decides to "meet Krishna personally," (172) and find some sign of his existence.

Symbolically, Som's journey is the journey of a soul trying to reach out to faith in God. In the course of this journey, he encounters a few character-a little boys and an old man- that serve as eye-openers to him. The little boy who accompanies the group of men carrying his sick old grand father in a palanquin is a striking contrast to Som. They are carrying the old men from Jaipur to a strange lake in the mountains where he is to die. The boy is desperately looking for a rare pebble in the mountain that he has come to know about from his grand father. On being asked by Som what his reaction would be if he didn't find the stone, the boy nonchalantly says it would affect him the least, which is based on the Karmic principle in the Bhagavadgita. But Som lacks this intuitive wisdom of the boy.

Som's encounter with the old man is his encounter with death itself. Som is astonished to know that he has traveled nine hundred miles to this lake in the belief that this would send him to heaven. Here also a
sense of deja vu leaves Som dumb and he feels himself an outsider to this world as much as he was in the world of Aftab and Anuradha. But a bit of metamorphosis does take place in him. As Som says:

Along with the old man we had all traveled to the other world, haunting, free from fear, you might as well be afraid of a train traveling from one station to another. That black lake, those bronze cliffs, was certainly another station. (194)

Actually the boy stands for faith in desire less “Karma” where only “Karma” was important and not the fruit thereof, and the old man stands for absolute faith in God and his machinations. As H.M. Prasad observes:

Som, like the pilgrim in Banyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* passes through the crisscross of agonizing experiences and *The Last Labyrinth* is a drama of a pilgrim’s progress of modern times.\(^{15}\)

But Som is not yet home spiritually. He is still a sceptic like Hamlet about “the undiscovered country, from whose bourn No traveler returns.” His confrontation with death like Hamlet’s when accidental intervention of the pirates makes him realize “there’s a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will,” teaches him a bit of the spiritual lesson.

At last Som reaches the temple of Krishna at the summit of the mountains, and is surprised to find Gargi there. It is here that K's identity is revealed, as he introduces him to Gargi: “This is Dr. Kashyap. He saved my life” (202). K even discloses the miracle about Som's
unaccountable recovery from the nearly fatal heart attack, thereby suggesting Anuradha's role in his life. K divulges the secret that it was not him who had saved Som and that he was as good as dead when Anuradha came to him in the hospital. On the night before, Anuradha had gone on a journey with K to retrieve the missing shares. But seeing his critical condition she straightaway went to Gargi to implore her to save Som. On Gargi's refusal to perform a miracle, Anuradha persisted, begged, wept, and threatened that if she did not save Som she would kill herself. Dr. Kashyap with a choking voice 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 hope whatsoever and I want to know: Did you save him? Anuradha says you did. And in turn 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 (206).

To this Gargi only gives him an enigmatic smile of hers, and admits that she has the package of shares, which she will hand over to them next morning.

Love means sacrifice. Absolute love means absolute sacrifice. Anuradha's ultimate sacrifice is reminiscent of Sarah Miles, the saint-sinner-adulteress in Graham Greene's novel, The End of the Affair. Sarah prayed to God for the life of her lover, Maurice Bendrix, who had
apparently been killed in an air raid while he and Sarah were sleeping together: “Let him be alive, and I will believe, give him a chance. Let him have his happiness. Do this and I will believe..... I will give him up forever” (95). God answered this human prayer. Bendrix returned to life and Sarah instantly but without any explanation gave him up forever.

Gargi’s obstinate silence to K’s revelation leaves him totally confounded. It was Hobson's choice. He could either take it (the faith) or leave it. As Som says, “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” (207).

Although he rejects the incident as a "gimmick" and "half-assed rigmarole" (208), he is steadily but surely heading towards faith and trust. Entering the sanctum sanctorum of the temple he sees the man-high flame burning since time immemorial; Som says, “This, then, was Krishna, was it? Kneeling beside that fantastic flame, my heart bursting with sorrow and my old demented love for Anuradha, I Vowed.... I was going to get the shares and Anuradha” (208). Even this flame fails to offer him any eternal bliss. Next morning he confesses to Gargi that he is grabbing the shares to avenge Anuradha’s betrayal:

I cannot give up Anuradha, you know that. In the absence of evidence I intend to challenge the whole thing. I want to take not only these shares but also Anuradha. It scares me but I have no choice (213).
Gargi passes a note: “There is no harm in believing that God” exists and further “God does not seek revenge. Man's vanity ahankar brings him revenge enough” (213-14).

Som takes the shares and returns with Anurahda. Tired he lies down on the bank of a stream with his head on the bundle of shares, and gazes at the impersonal vastness of the sky above him. The thoughts that come to his mind are that of Prince Andrew in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*:

I was reminded of Prince Andrew, knocked down like a dummy without firing a shot. He had imagined himself to be ambitious. He had hoped Austerlitz would do for him what Toulon had done for the Bonaparte. Lying in the mud, cannon balls flying over him, he had stared at the vast cosmic impersonal dome of the sky and had wondered: My God, where have I been all these years. Why had I never looked at the sky before (214-15).

Now he realizes that the revenge and the bundle of shares actually hold nothing for him and feels utterly defeated. He reflects on the entire episode and realizes that no external system can cure man of the malaise, that the malaise lay within him, and the solution to it should be from within. This is the only truth he had learnt from his journey to the mountains.

Back to Benares Som meets Aftab and repeatedly implores him to see Anuradha. His wish is granted but Anuradha asks him to leave the Lal Haveli immediately: “You don't understand. You don't know these
people. Things could happen to you in this Haveli and no one would ever know” (279). He leaves the Haveli and comes back the next morning to find that she had gone to the Krishna temple on the night of Janmashtami but did not return. Som reports the matter to the police. The place is raided and only piece of antique clothing is found, perhaps, of hers. Anuradha's leaving Som reminds us of Gerald's leaving Gudrun in Lawrence's Women in Love. Gerald wants to break free of Gudrun. As she is domineering and possessive by nature, Gerald wanders off into the snow of the Alps for good. Perhaps, Anuradha too wanders off into the labyrinth of the Lal Haveli and dies. Like Bendrix in The End of the Affair, Som seeks God's forgiveness like a defeated existentialist through his intercession:

Anuradha, listen, listen wherever you are. Is there a God where you are? Have you met Him? Does he understand the language that we speak? Anuradha if there is a God and if you 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 doubtings. Of this dark earth and these empty heavens. Plead for me, Anuradha. He will listen to you (222-23).

This poignant cry suggests that Anuradha has become “the core of his existence, the crystallization of the meaning of his life.” Anuradha, to Som, is a living mystery. Her mystery behind her is her unbelievable
character, which Aftab sums up thus: “It is just that she can’t stand to see anybody fail. It breaks her heart” (39). Her heart is capable of embracing everybody. She is spiritually deep and is not interested in carnal desires. She offers her body to Som when he badly needs it. She is above fear and shame and has become an “Sthitiprajna” (a stoic) of the Bhagavadgita. She is ever ready to sacrifice. Joshi wroth her character on the lines of Vedic “Panchmahakanyas” who are doubted to be physically impure but mentally chaste. She disappears when his love becomes possessive like the mythical Trishanku. He still dangles between skepticism and faith; the thoughts that colloide like atoms in his skull could be “the harbinger, the pilot escort, of melancholia...of insanity... (or of) faith” (223).

Like Abhimanyu of the Mahabharata, he is still in the labyrinth of existence lost in the "Chakravyuha" where there is an easy way in but an impossible way out. The novel ends where it began. Listening to the roaring hollowness of the void within at night, he puts down in the minute book his thoughts. Unlike the other protagonists of Joshi, he does not progress from alienation to existential affirmation.

Geeta's character works as a Dostoevskian mirror to Som that helps the author to lay bare Som’s inherent character by contrast or juxtaposition.

In utter frustration Som attempts to commit suicide that is denied him. As he places the revolver on his temple, his wife Geeta shakes him
“gently as though rousing a man from well sleep” (224). Joshi perhaps suggests that the trusting Geeta will restore the utterly discontented Som to peace and tranquility. In the closing sentence, Som says, “I hope she understands” (224).

Joshi suggests that an unswerving "trust in the world's mechanisms," can only solve the labyrinths of existence. H.M. Prasad apply says:

Bhaskar’s dilemma has crystallized the sociological, psychological and metaphysical dimensions of human existence into Joshi’s unique vision of modern man’s predicament. Som Bhaskar is an archetype of the new man and *The Last Labyrinth* is a fictional tour-de-force on the chaos of existence and the crisis of consciousness.17

Joshi suggests faith as the key to happiness and success. When Som asks the panda on the day for vows if people's wishes really get fulfilled, he says, “It depends on their faith. Faith can move mountains.” (198) As Som himself later quotes Kierkegaard: “Prayer does not change God but it changes him who prays”(118).

Tapan Kumar Ghosh remarks: “The Last Labyrinth is a deep psychological exploration of a lost soul.”18 He is modern man lost between two worlds, unable to accept or fully reject any of the two contradictory worlds. As H.M. Prasad remarks: “The Last Labyrinth is a fictional tour-de-force on the chaos of existence and the crisis of
consciousness.” His intellectual pride, his great reliance on reason and his faith in science and logic are great impediments to his spiritual realization. Though he is curious to have faith but he wants signs, which reminds us of what Christ said to the Pharisees when they asked him to perform a miracle to prove God's existence. But Jesus gave a deep groan and said, “Why do the people of this day ask for a miracle? No, I tell you!” Only complete faith and absolute surrender to God or Lord Krishna can emancipate Som of his physical and mental problem.

Either he should have unconditional faith like his mother's or for that matter, his wife Geeta's, or should have Anuradha-like suffering. He wants faith without any sacrifice. According to Hindu cosmology, it is sacrifice that is at the root of creation. S. Radhakrishnan writes: “Prayer and sacrifice are means to spiritual life. While true sacrifice is the abandonment of one's ego, prayer is the exploration of reality by entering the beyond, that is, within, by ascension of consciousness.” She has an understanding, which ordinary women do not possess. But his pride in his so-called education, and especially his desire to possess her render him insane enough not to realize her as the last ray of hope to egress from the blind alley. As Lord Krishna tells Arjuna not to harbour desires that would eventually lead to insanity. It is the strident voice. “I want, I want,
I want” that is the root of his malaise. But Anuradha's offer to cure Som
of his malaise is spurned in a state of total insanity."

Joshi believes that “it is very difficult to steer one's way through
life without God, or at least concepts like right or wrong.”22 For Som the
understanding born of suffering and humiliation is lost to him, and he
remains to the end in introspective solitude.

The influence of the Upanishads may also be expressly seen by the
reference of the great Upanishad sage Yajnavalkya twice in the work for
a particularly poignant question that is addressed to him. In the
Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, King Janaka asks, “And when the sun is set,
Yajnavalkya, and the moon is also set, and the fire has sunk down and
voice is silent, what, then, is the light of man?”23 Though the novel does
not answer this question, but Yajnavalkya replies, “The self, indeed, is his
light.”24 But the covetous, proud and insane Som spurns the only hope he
could have had. Like Kafka's K in The Castle he tries hard to explore the
mystery of the divine reality and thereby ascertain the presence of God,
but comes out empty handed. As H.M. Prasad opines:

In his quest, in his intent to unravel cosmic mystery, Bhaskar is
a modernized, secularized, empiric zed, skeptical Nachiketa
who has been denied the faith and resolution of the
Upanishadie model.25

Arun Joshi suggests that the ultimate truth and reality could be
realized if only one were to forsake rationalism. Humility, sacrifice and suffering are the three-fold path to exploring Divine truth. Although on closer scrutiny this novel unfolds a conspicuous crisscross of the various Oriental and Occidental literary influences, Arun Joshi’s remarkably artistic sensibility has assimilated these influences and rendered the novel a powerful masterpiece revealing his vision of life which is undeniably his own-a Hindu vision of life.

Som becomes a psychological case. He delineates very deftly those profound hidden of the mind which the probings of psychology disclose to us. The Last Labyrinth explores these recesses of Som’s mind. “Like Jungian or Pirandelian man, he is full of inner disharmony and is a loose cluster of masks or fragments of identity”

Like Billy and Ratan, Som does not progress from alienation to existential affirmation. In a letter to V. Gopal Reddy dated January 8, 1981. Joshi confirms "alienation of my 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 it does not happen.”

This is a metaphysical awareness of human loneliness, of human inadequacy, of human unfulfilment. Joshi’s odyssey has been from man suffering from a cause to man suffering for being Man with consciousness. Bhaskar’s dilemma has crystallized the sociological,
psychological and metaphysical dimensions of human existence into Joshi’s unique vision of modern man’s predicament. Som Bhaskar is an archetype of the new man and *The Last Labyrinth* is a fictional *tour-de-force* on the chaos of existence and the crisis of consciousness.”

Som’s dilemma springs from the double inheritance—the Western and the Indian ethos. There is much of the subjective element in the character of Som. Both the protagonist and the novelist are made out of the dual forces—the Western and the Indian. Som, like Arun Joshi, is an Indian with a Western orientation, having his education abroad and imbibing in his thoughts the Western outlook—orderliness, neatness, and the value of being organized in life. Talking of his formative influences, Joshi reveals in his interview with Sujatha Mathai that he has been considerably influenced by Camus and other Western existentialist writers as well as Mahatma Gandhi and the Bhagwadgita. His situation is one of absurdity as Ionesco defines: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”

The crisis of identity in *The Last Labyrinth* is not due to the confrontation “with society but with forms and forces beyond the recurrings of reason and science.” The paradoxes emerging out of faith and reason, miracle and expiation give the novel some of the features of
fantasy “because of the intriguing juxtaposition of the sensual and the spiritual weird locales crumbling Haveli....”
We have seen how Leila Sabnis attributes Som's problems to that of identity. Som Bhaskar is not ready to associate himself with any mystical identification.

All along his life Som Bhaskar suffers from an inner crisis and, as R.S. Pathak writes, “is apparently at war with himself.” Som Bhaskar analyses himself:

If I believed in God I could pray, may be run a rosary through my fingers. But that's out. Sitting around. I get into arguments: with the living, with the dead, with myself.

Som Bhaskar finds no solace in his education which makes him all the more melancholy. Even Anuradha tells him of his lack of self-knowledge, “You are wrong even about yourself. You think you know a lot, when, in fact, you don’t.” Aftab too finds him empty of that understanding that only suffering an humiliation bring. This kind of understanding is there in the personality of Anuradha who had to pass through harrowing tales of lost childhood, suffering and humiliation. Dr. K. refers to these very pointedly:

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? (190)
In his anguished should Som Bhaskar addresses the missing Anuradha:

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. (223)

Leila Sabnis earlier had psychoanalysed Som Bhaskar's lack of stamina for mystical identification on the basis "You haven't got the faith. You have always been a sceptic. You always will be." (113)

The text of The Last Labyrinth has predominance of use of images associated with labyrinth and void. Moreover as R.S. Pathak writes, "Words like 'dream,' 'mystery,' 'reality' and 'understanding' seem to serve as recurrent motifs in the novel. All these are related to Som Bhaskar's crisis of identity and of consciousness. These woman characters such as Anuradha, Geeta and Gargi are the persons who know. Even Aftab has deep faith in spiritual matters. But it is Som Bhaskar who lies outside. He himself thinks of the wanters and the givers "and often, the wanters, I know, don't recognise the givers, or the givers the wanters."(62) The crisis with Som Bhaskar is that he is always a wanter and never a giver. Aftab Rai point out to him of this discrepancy:

You have to sacrifice before you are given. You can't have your cake and eat it too. You want to have faith. But you also want to reserve the right to challenge you own fate when it suits you. 116)
Som Bhaskar does not even believe in Kierkegaard's saying, "Prayer does not change God but changes him who prays." (118) The Last Labyrinth does not seem to close with any positive progression of ideas and as Joshi has himself written in a letter to V. Gopal Reddy, "Alienation of my novels which I have written so far, ultimately leads them back to community. I realise that in my latest novel The Last Labyrinth for the first time it does not happen."

35 The heroes of both The Foreigner and The Last Labyrinth suffer from the malady of the crisis of identity. But while in The Foreigner it is at the mundane levels of existence, rootlessness, lonelines and lack of identity with the problems of existence, in The Last Labyrinth the crisis of identity is at the cosmic level besides the physical one. Till the end Som Bhaskar fails to get reconciled with the problems of life and death, science and religion, miracle and reason. The novel opens with the vow of revenge and closes with Som Bhaskar's abortive suicidal gesture as Geeta intervenes.

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References


4. Arun Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1981), 11. All further references are to this edition. Page numbers are documented parenthetically immediately after the citation.


23. S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 154


34. *Ibid*, 118