CHAPTER FOUR

LOST IN THE LABYRINTH

SELF AND SOCIETY IN THE LAST LABYRINTH

The Last Labyrinth is the most discussed of Arun Joshi’s novels as well as his most complex and sophisticated. Som Bhaskar, its protagonist, comes closest to being an existential character similar to those in some of the Western existential novels. However he differs from them in some essential respects. He has a restless and obsessive urge to know the meaning of existence and life, but he never goes after the ‘absurd’. To go from The Apprentice examined in the previous chapter, to The Last Labyrinth is to move away at once from the limited, circumscribed and temporal world of earth-bound ambitions, material pursuits, successes, rivalries and failures, social and economic disparities and perplexities, and ambiguous practices, and to enter a world whose concerns are a complex of issues metaphysical, sensual and spiritual rather than societal. The novel itself is of moderate length but the issues raised in it are very large. Death, love, God, the dialectic between Reason and Faith, spirit and matter, the meaning and purpose of human life and existence and such trans-societal concerns predominate in the novel rather than strictly social issues and self’s relation to society. All these are basic human preoccupations of all time. These questions, of course, are very much present in the other novels of Joshi. Sindi Oberoi, Ratan Rathor and Billy Biswas are also earnestly engaged in different ways in the meaning of life. The first four novels of Joshi form, as Hari Mohan Prasad puts it, “a corporate cluster, a quest quartet”. However, the trans-societal concerns mentioned above are raised in The Last Labyrinth by the protagonist with a sense of urgency unprecedented, almost to the exclusion of social and moral concerns which
form the stuff out of which the other novels of Joshi are made. Therefore the self's relation to society, the transactions between the two as such, which is pronounced in the other novels, does not have the same degree of importance in this novel. However, it does have a relevance to its ultimate meaning. Socio-economic issues which figure recognisably in The Foreigner and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, and prominently in The Apprentice are only touched by the fringe in The Last Labyrinth. Had Som Bhaskar been less unconcerned with other people and the life of society, and more involved in his family, wife and children, probably some of the angularities of his character would have been rounded off, some of the perplexities troubling him would have lost their edge, and his own attitude to life would have been different. But, that is to anticipate.

Som Bhaskar as a character is far more complex than any of the other protagonists of Joshi. His relation to others, his family and society and his attitude to them all stem largely from his peculiar nature which sometimes appears to be rather abnormal. In fact he lends himself to be described in terms of psychoanalysis and mental illness. That is what his scholar-friend Leela Sabnis does. But the turbulence of his soul cannot be explained or explained away in those terms, as Som’s old and experienced psychiatrist friend whom he consults tells him: “You know, Mr. Bhaskar, psychiatry doesn’t allow certain approaches to problems like yours --- such problems existed much before the advent of psychiatry. Certain approaches were devised at that time”.² What his particular problems are which obsess him will be seen shortly. Because of these problems, he is so much preoccupied with himself that he has at best only a peripheral relation with society. Therefore the question of his withdrawal from it like Sindi Oberoi or abandoning it like Billy Biswas does not arise at all. He takes it for granted
and functions as if he is independent of it. It is not that he does so consciously or deliberately. However, he has to experience the consequences of this attitude of indifference because of which he loses rather than gains.

Born with a silver spoon in his mouth as the only child and son of aristocratic parents, Som had for long every wish of his gratified. He had no idea at all of the many deprivations of life and sufferings most people are liable to. He “had been to the world’s finest universities ---, a quarter of a million had been spent on (his) education”. He was a millionaire at twenty five, had much more money than he knew, and could afford to be indifferent to it. He soon became a prosperous industrialist with an expanding empire. He was ambitious of success and fame, and was fortunate in both. At home, there was his wife Geeta, educated, beautiful, loving and devoted, a marvelous gentle person, and the very embodiment of spontaneous and absolute trust. They had two daughters to complete the picture of Som's domestic felicity and familial happiness. He enjoyed social status, influence, and a sense of social security that naturally came to one of his position in society. What more would one want in life, one might be inclined to ask. For all of his earthly wants and needs were more than gratified and nothing seemed to be left out for him to seek. All said, Som seemed to be in safe harbour, and could be the envy others in every respect.

However, Som Bhaskar whom we meet in the opening pages of the novel strikes us as a very different kind of person, far from being complacent or contented or satisfied. His very first entry in his minutes-book – “Above all I have a score to settle. I forget nothing, forgive no one” – suggests unmistakably a person, who brooding over his past, speaks in the bitterness of
a great personal disappointment and frustration. Incidentally, it also strikes the keynote of his character and reveals in a nutshell his excessive preoccupation with himself and his a-social nature. One may also see in it a hint of his egotistical predicament which the novel elaborates. From several of his other entries in his diary we learn that he has been experiencing for years a sense of inadequacy, an emptiness, a vacuum within as well as without, which he calls "voids":

"It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and empty spaces, within and without --- voids of caves and voids of the sky; the terrible vacancies of lokalok". These words suggest a condition of spiritual vacuum and sterility. Som is also possessed by an ungratified "hunger", which he cannot define, but all the time he hears the strident refrain, "I want, I want, I want" inside himself. He wryly notes in his diary that discontent is his "trademark". Another revealing entry in his diary reads thus: "Hunger of the body. Hunger of the spirit. You suffer from one or the other or both". Yet another diary jotting says: "What I needed --- was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds (ie the world of the spirit and the world of matter) combined. In a significant sense The Last Labyrinth is all about Som Bhaskar's anguished but unsuccessful attempts to understand and gratify these two hungers of the flesh and spirit in himself, and to combine the worlds of matter and spirit, to the exclusion of every other interest in life, his industrial enterprises not excepted.

It is neither incredible nor impossible, though somewhat unusual, for an affluent person like Som, placed comfortably and securely in fortunate circumstances of life, and delighted for a time in the commercial Darwinism of the survival of the fittest, and the cornering of companies, to be engrossed by questions about death, soul, God, and the meaning and purpose of life, all imponderables which have teased mankind out of thought for centuries.
Moreover what makes Som raise those questions, about which he is certainly in earnest, is not provoked by external circumstance, or the conspicuous disorder or chaos of the outside world. But it springs directly from the dislocation within himself. It cannot be related to any particular social or societal cause or circumstance, as it can be in the case of Sindi, Billy and Ratan who are urged to raising like questions by certain compelling circumstances, happenings and experiences in their lives, and the pressures exerted on them by their social environment. It is not all implied, however, that these three are under the grip of society without any scope of individual initiative.

Before considering Som's dilemmas, turbulences and struggles, in short his predicament, some of the other related aspects of the novel may be briefly considered. Unlike Joshi's other novels *The Last Labyrinth* does not have a story interest as such. External events certainly there are, but not many and none dramatic enough to arrest attention. In fact outward events do not have as much importance as what happens in the interior landscape of the protagonist's mind. Som's consciousness holds the centre stage and the focus is on his individual psyche, his inner self. Outward events are not only few and far between but the casual relations between them, one event inevitably leading on to the other, are not and cannot be established. That is to say, the plot of the novel is rather slender and thin. But *The Last Labyrinth* is not the conventional kind of novel.

At the surface level the novel is about Som Bhaskar the shrewd Bombay industrialist and businessman, a master of cornering others' companies, who has to try rather hard to grab the plastic manufacturing company of Aftab Rai, a feudal zamindar and an inefficient
businessman of Benaras, and Anuradha his female companion. On another and a more important level it is about his anxious search through lust and love for the meaning of life and death. Finally the novel becomes the spiritual autobiography – since Som Bhaskar the protagonist himself tells his story – a miniature odyssey of a lonely, lost soul, a spiritually lonely and isolated nowhere man. Som’s determined and frantic pursuit of the enigmatic lady Anuradha who fascinates him from the moment he meets her, which strangely brings him face to face with the mysteries of life, death, faith and God, forms the nucleus of the story. His infatuation for her brings to the sharpest focus all the questions which had been troubling him for long. It is a very complex affair in which the sensual and the spiritual clash, collide and get inextricably interwoven. Som’s search for Anuradha and his quest for the meaning of life both get inseparably entangled. This story is recorded and revealed in an unusual kind of personal diary maintained by Som himself. This brings us to the form given to the novel and the narrative strategy employed in it by Joshi.

In form and technique The Last Labyrinth differs from all the other novels of Joshi. Though he employs first-person protagonist narrative in this novel too, he gives it a form and structure very different from those employed in his other protagonist confessional novels. Here he adopts the form of a minutes-book used as a sort of dateless diary of autobiographical reminiscences by the protagonist Som Bhaskar, the central consciousness, who records in it at irregular intervals his encounters with the world: where he went, what he did, what happened to him in the past, what he has been doing and what is happening to him in the present, these and others without any regard to the chronology of events. He is a self-reflective and self-centred person whose mind is hyper-activated by its obsessions. The nature of the entries he
makes in his diary depends upon his state of mind at the time of recording them: reflective, ruminating, analytical, calm, conceited, excited, agitated, angry, anguished, turbulent, confused, etc. In a rare moment of detachment he admits, "I fool around in this book (i.e. The minutes-book) like a clown performing before a looking glass". In several places in the novel the mirror image recurs. Thus the diary reflects faithfully the working of Som's labyrinthine mind including his inconclusive internal debate, the serpentine coils of his thought, and the limitations of his perception and understanding.

Further, the self-revelatory and confessional entries of Som belong to different periods, some of them dating farther back to the days of his early adolescence when he was at school, and some very recent ones touching the present. In the process past and present not only get juxtaposed but run into each other. As no dates are mentioned, the interval of time between different entries relating to the past and the present is not always clear. Often it is the association of ideas and impressions in Som's mind that directs the course of his jottings. "The way he zigzags into his memory resembles a maze and is a reflection of his inner turbulence and restlessness". As in the case of Sindi and Ratan, Som's disparate experiences of different times get unified in his experiencing consciousness, despite his not adhering to their chronology. As Prasad observes, all his relations social and human become meaningful "Within the reach and scope of his narrative personality". What motivates him to writing his diary remains uncertain, except perhaps the wish to see himself reflected in it as in a mirror. In fact it had been suggested to his father Bhaskar Senior by his personal physician Dr. K. to maintain a regular diary perhaps to serve as a therapeutic exercise, as he was suffering from
Melancholia to which he finally succumbed. But he left the minutes-book unused, which ought to have been his diary.

It is a curious coincidence that Som should have taken up the same minutes-book left intact and unused by his father, for his personal diary. He explains in a fashion why he took it up: "Sitting around I get into arguments with the living and with the dead, and with myself. And I have had enough of the world’s arguments. To shut up everyone I took one night to this minutes-book". This testimony suggests that he began his diary in a disturbed and agitated state of mind, that he is very much preoccupied with himself, and that he is not only lonely but prefers his loneliness. Occasionally his diary entries give the impression that in making them he is trying to disburden himself rather than clarify his thoughts to himself through this exercise. The first entry in the diary, cited already is a case in point. It reveals, as noted already, the bitterness of a great personal disappointment and his preoccupation with himself. For these reasons his entries do not have the regularity and method of a personal confessional diary or a minutes-book. Moreover he does not seem to see or detect any pattern or significance in recording his impressions and experiences, although the alert reader would detect the presence.

Here lies the chief difference between Som on the one hand and Sindi and Ratan on the other, who also resort to confession. Their confessions are clearly directed towards an end, although they may not be aware of the routes they take. For both of them confession is a therapeutic exercise, a cleansing of their inner being which they consciously seek. It is also a means for them to seek and recover their lost sense of community, free themselves from their
sense of loneliness and estrangement and reintegrate themselves with society. Their confession moves them steadily towards it. Som’s confession does not achieve this end. It ends where it began, having traversed through the labyrinth of his mind. All the entries in his diary consisting of his ravings and reflections, despairs and doubts nightmarish dreams, interior monologues and self-analysis, records of his conversation with a select few like Aftab, Anuradha, Bhaskar Senior, K and Gargi, and some linear narrative—these together constitute the body of the novel. Joshi gives them deftly the form and structure of a well-organised novel. All the components establish Som’s absorption in himself from which he is not able to escape.

Som records in his diary frankly and without any inhibition the story of his life, as he perceives himself and others. He is not able to maintain always the necessary distance between the experiencing and witnessing self and the narrating self to achieve the degree of objectivity to make himself a reliable narrator throughout. All the entries in the diary about people and places are made entirely from his point of view as he sees them rather than as they are. As in all first-person narratives here too the narrator Som’s psychology affects the form and content of his self-narration. The narrative sequence too is shaped in accordance with the flow of his feelings, impressions and thoughts and the association of ideas in his mind. Perspectives of time and place shift without notice according to his state of mind. The two short opening paragraphs of the novel, for instance, relate to Som’s immediate present in Bombay, and what he refers to is “chronologically the point in time at the end of the action”, as Sham Sunder Sharma points out. It is as if the end is also the beginning of the action. As Som, convalescing from a serious illness, looks at the grey sea from his sick-room, he is reminded of another sea, the blue sea in Ceylon, where he was sent by his father years ago to negotiate
deals, and of Anuradhapura. That name triggers off memories of the enigmatic lady Anuradha with whom he is involved and who, as we learn later from the diary, has eluded him and vanished from his life altogether, leaving him utterly desolate. The angry outburst with which the diary begins is probably occasioned by this experience. From that moment in the remote past Som's mind swings back to his listless and restless present, his insomnia, and his endless arguments with himself. Then again it flashes back to that summer in Delhi when he met Anuradha for the first time, which turned out to be a crucial and decisive turning point in his life, changing the course and tenor of it completely.

Som's mind, its perplexity and puzzlement and confusion, his sense of being lost in a maze of ideas, can be best understood in his own language and idiom. And hence the appropriateness of the first-person protagonistic narrative. How his mind, which is rarely steady or tranquil, influences his perception of places and people may be seen in his jottings on Benaras and his going with Anuradha to the various shrines on the ghats of the Ganga during the Janmastami celebrations. This is how the pilgrims going to the different temples appear to him: "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 have expected disgust". He is disconcerted that Anuradha, unmindful of the dung soaking the hem of her sari, and indifferent to the "slush mingled with filth, banana peels, cowdung and urine" on the ground, goes from shrine to shrine to pray and make offerings. On the other hand, he is revolted at the sight of the mutilated bodies of lepers among the beggars sitting there with outstretched hands. Anuradha's ecstasy and the devotional fervour of the pilgrims make no impression on him. It all seems ridiculous, and therefore he stands aloof, alone and unconcerned, as an outsider. He
seems to notice particularly and only what is most repulsive. He just cannot stand Benaras which for him is a “city, diseased and bankrupt, wallowing in filth and humbug --- (and) perversion”.¹⁶

Som Bhaskar's spiritual rootlessness and nowhereness, loneliness, isolation and estrangement are a consequence of his deep-rooted scepticism and what amounts to his obstinate distrust and virtual rejection of his country's spiritual heritage, his obsessive demand for visible and tangible proofs for the existence of soul, God, after-life etc., and his inability to realise the limits of reason and logic. However his sincerity and earnestness in questioning cannot be doubted at all. Som is an intellectual, highly educated with a Western orientation. He is not only familiar with Western thought – he "did a paper on Pascal" at Harvard¹⁷ – but has unqualified faith in reason. He also claims to know of Krishna and Buddha, and their teachings. But he would not take anything on trust and wants evidence and demonstrable proof for him to believe in anything. Not only he does not suspend his judgement regarding others' beliefs, but he does not admit the possibility of other legitimate and viable ways of knowing and apprehending truths about life and existence. He does not seem to have been or trained to believe in anything by his parents but left free to develop his own beliefs and convictions. However he has felt the impact of his parents who held sharply opposed beliefs and attitudes according to which they lived. Some of his soul's disturbances could have derived from them. His mother to whom he was deeply attached and who was afflicted with the killer disease Cancer was blindly and fanatically devoted to Krishna. She implicitly believed that he would cure her, and therefore she stubbornly refused to take any medicine despite appeals and importunities. In boiling rage at her superstitious beliefs, Som once had swept off her table the gods and
goddesses she worshipped. But she drove herself to death and preferred to die rather than give up Krishna. Her death was a traumatic experience to the adolescent Som who naturally developed complete distrust of Krishna, god-men and miracle men, and all forms of religious faith and worship. Later in life he tells Anuradha cryptically that his mother died of "Cancer and Krishna".  

Som's father had a different kind of impact on him, though unconscious. He, an eager and anxious seeker given to endless introspection, was by temperament and training a scientist and a brilliant chemist. He had become a businessman by fluke. A bruised soul, he was given to ceaseless questioning. Brooding over the mystery of life and death especially after his wife's death, he wondered about the "Causes of things, things that happen to men, to objects". He wanted to know if there was "a First Cause that would explain everything whose nature might lie behind the nature of all the rest". But he was no egotist like his son and was remarkably humble in his quest and totally free from conceit and pride. And he had the honesty and integrity to admit "science cannot solve the problems of the causes", and wished that "the mystics would offer evidence of God like the scientists do". He had studied the Upanishads but felt disappointed and perplexed by the vagueness of their answers to his questions. Towards the end of his life his faith in reason too seemed to totter. His endless introspection and interrogation led to acute and incurable depression and ultimately he died of Melancholia. Som was unconsciously influenced by his father's sceptical attitude and hunger of the spirit. But he did not acquire his humility. At a certain stage of his conceited youth he had even felt superior to his father and patronised him when he was actually struggling with "the weight of centuries", and even thought that his father's talk about the First Cause was mere "chatter".23
However, Som’s cocksureness does not last long. The “great roaring hollowness” which first entered his consciousness at the time of his mother’s death when he was a mere teenager, becomes more and more frequent with time, and gets expanded and intensified into “voids” wherever he is or goes. This obsessive sense of emptiness and vacuum gets coupled with an undefined and ungratified hunger or ‘want’. Plagued thus by both and in a bid to overcome them, especially the ‘hunger’, he becomes acquisitive like a typical egotist and takes to possessing objects, business enterprises, and women. But none of them satisfies him, not even Anuradha for whom his infatuation knows no bounds. He tells his personal physician K:

--- for many years now I have had the 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 wanted. My hunger was just as bad as ever. --- The more I took of her (ie. Anuradha), the more I wanted.

With her disappearance never to come back, he feels that she has ditched him.

The reasoning and questioning spirit and the refusal to take anything on trust or without proof which Som had unconsciously absorbed from his scientist father, are made more keen and strengthened by his Western education. To that extent it was a real and desirable gain. But taken to the extremes, it narrows down his perception and vision. He becomes dismissive of ideas and practices which do not fit into his framework which has its limitations. Doubt and scepticism have such a grip over him that for him Gargi’s dying father receiving a new lease of life from his father who prayed to God that his life may be taken and his son’s spared, is no more than a mere ‘story’, a piece of fiction although it is Anuradha, who has begun to fascinate him, that narrates the incident to him. Not only that, he is even sceptical of Anuradha’s saving
his own life, when his experienced and expert physician K was convinced that he had no chance, no hope whatsoever, of survival, by promising Gargi the dumb mystic to give up Som for ever as the price to save him from certain death. And it is no ordinary sacrifice and act of self-denial for her to give up what was most dear to her. Moreover, it is his agnostic physician who tells him of it and not any other credulous person to doubt its authenticity. And he had known Anuradha's nature, her predilections and her loving concern for him so well as to leave any room for any doubt. Yet he remains sceptical of its possibility and dismisses it all as a "gimmick".26

Strangely Som, who swears by reason and logic and adheres to them obstinately, is not always rational in his behaviour, nor is he wholly comfortable or satisfied in that realm. Deep down in him, unknown to himself, there is a desire to believe, perhaps in God. But this desire is constantly thwarted by his doubt, his intellectual pride, and his demand for a certain kind of evidence. His philosopher-friend Leela Sabnis analyses his dilemma as "a problem of identity". She tells him:

--- may be what you want is a mystical identification, identification with a godhead, as most Hindus want, sooner or later --- you haven't got the stamina for that --- you haven't got the faith. You have always been a sceptic. You always will be.27

Som's own words to Gargi explain his dilemma. In response to her suggestion that "There is no harm in believing that God exists", he pleadingly tells her: "--- don't misunderstand me. I want to know. Probably I want to believe. But one can't order belief. I must have evidence --- In the absence of evidence I intend to challenge the whole thing. ---".28 True to Leela Sabnis's
words which prove prophetic. Som is not prepared to accept the belief or faith which is within his reach, or at least give it a try. Therefore his dilemma remains unresolved: he wants to believe but does not have the will for it.

Aftab characterises Som's dilemma precisely. He tells him: “You want to have faith. But you also want to reserve the right to challenge your own faith when it suits you”. It is as if he wants to have the cake and eat it too. This approach is self-defeating and cannot take him very far. For some months he is fascinated by the sophisticated intellectual and energetic Cartesian Leela Sabnis, who has an endless passion for analysis, explanation, and reasoning things through. Therefore he hopes that she may have the powers to cure him of his dilemmas. Her prescription of Descartes for all questions, who was determined to accept nothing on trust and believed that the pursuit of truth was a wholly individual matter logically independent of past thought, fails to satisfy Som or clear his doubts. He wants someone who combines the worlds of matter and spirit. Leela who keeps them separated scrupulously, has no answer to his questions or remedy for his “wants”. Her sympathetic concern for him and her tireless analysis of his problems and explanations cannot silence “the strumming of great chords way up in the sky, beating the old tattoo: I want, I want, I want”. Moreover he finds Leela herself to be “a muddled creature”, even though she knows a lot, “muddled by her ancestry, by marriage, by divorce, by too many books”. Experience of being knocked about in the maze of thought without a sense of direction, Som realises that such doubting is not natural to the East but an import from the West. In a mood of introspection he admits with candour to himself: “--- children of the West grew up doubting everything. And, now it had come to the East,
along with Coca Cola, IBM and the English Language. I could see it all too clearly in my case, even in my father's case".31 Yet he does not try out what the East can offer.

As a result of it all, Som becomes spiritually displaced, culturally uprooted, losing whatever hold he had on the tradition of his land, and socially estranged. Things fall apart in his life and there is no centre to hold them together. He is caught between two worlds, at home with neither. He resembles Triśanku of Indian mythology, who is caught between the earth and heaven and belongs to neither. His "horizon is in twilight", neither day nor night, neither light nor darkness, as Hari Mohan Prasad32 remarks. How acute, unsettling and suffocating the anxiety caused by this condition is, may be sensed from an episode he records in his diary. While coming down in a lift on a certain day sometime after he had recovered from a severe heart attack, he has this experience : "I was afraid the electricity would fail and I would be left hanging between two floors. It would not return for hours. The doors would be jammed and the air would be short of oxygen. Anything could happen then".33

Significantly Som views himself as one who is always caught in a maze, a labyrinth, without knowing the escape route, his doubts remaining unresolved and his questions unanswered. In fact he is obsessed with labyrinths of different kinds. He uses the word 'labyrinth' so frequently and in so many different situations that it becomes his most favourite and expressive metaphor and symbol to encompass all that is inexplicable to him, eludes or defies rational explanation for him, and in short all the enigmas and mysteries of life he encounters. Therefore for a complete grasp of the novel a detailed analysis is necessary of this image, which acquires "a thematic resonance and a metaphoric inclusiveness"34 in the fictional
context. But it is outside the scope of the present study. However, in view of its particular importance, it may be considered briefly. It may be noted at this point itself that to Som society, social relations and tensions do not appear to be labyrinthine because he does not think of them, his preoccupations being different.

Joshi had already used the image "labyrinth" and its analogues "maze" and "impasse" in his earlier novels. Sindi in The Foreigner talks of the bleeding wound "somewhere in the labyrinth of consciousness"
Romesh Sahai in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas talks of life's meaning to be sought "in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul". In The Last Labyrinth, however, Joshi makes the most extensive use of this word and image exploiting all of its possible suggestions and symbolic implications, by making it work at different levels in the fictional context.

The image of labyrinth itself is both ancient and modern, traditional and contemporary, and has been used variously and creatively by several writers in its literal and metaphorical senses. Literally labyrinth refers to intricate alleys and tortuous paths within or without a building in which it is difficult to find the way out. It is easy to get lost in a confusing set of connecting passages or paths. Therefore as a metaphor and symbol, labyrinth has immense suggestive possibilities. In the West its use is traced back to the Cretan myth of the monster Minotaur placed in a labyrinthine structure, and the Athenian hero Theseus who kills the monster and finds his way out of the labyrinth. This mythical story has been told by Ovid and Apollodorus. In their version the stress is laid on the hero's worth as a man and as a triumphant quester. In the Indian epic Mahabharata the impenetrable battle formation
known as Padmavyūha or Chakravyūha devised by the Kauravas is also an intricate and treacherous labyrinth. Abhimanyu, the heroic Pandava prince, knew only how to get in, but not the way out, and therefore lost his life. To the modern writer especially of the West who is concerned with man’s isolation, loneliness, and the absurdity of human existence, the labyrinth as a symbol has a special appeal. Gabriel Josepovic writes: “From the cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues of *Gerontion*, through the mazes of Kafka, Proust, Borges and Robbe-Gillet, the labyrinth has been the favourite image of modern literature”.37 Jorge Luis Borges the Argentine writer retells the Cretan myth in his short story “The House of Asterion”. He is said to turn the old myth completely upside down. He takes away all the glamour, heroism, courageous deeds and bravery from Theseus. The Minotaur is presented as a complex figure, lonely, proud, frightened and misunderstood. He scarcely makes an attempt to defend himself.38 “Borge’s story”, says Prasad, “emphasizes the essential loneliness of man, and the pitiable nature of his existence and the brittleness of all speculative instruments that analyse it”.39

In all likelihood Joshi was familiar with the different literary uses of ‘labyrinth’ made by other writers. But his uses of it in The Last Labyrinth are different from theirs. He imaginatively uses it making it resonant with its nuances of meaning, retaining its suggestion of loneliness, isolation, confusion of mind and thought, and of being trapped. Som Bhaskar, who is lonely, isolated and estranged, is obsessed with various labyrinths. Appropriately the image of labyrinth is most closely associated with him, his world, and his unsuccessful attempts to unravel the mystery of life, love, death and divinity. At the literal and factual level, he has his first experience of an actual labyrinth in Lal Haveli, Aftab’s decrepit mansion,
situated in a blind alley amidst a maze of narrow streets and the labyrinths of Benaras. "built with no plan or with a most meticulous plan". "a labyrinth within the labyrinth of lanes that stretch westwards from the ghats of Benaras". The city of Benaras itself appears to Som to be a city of labyrinths.

The word labyrinth acquires metaphorical and symbolic extension of meaning in Som's use depending upon the condition of his mind at a given moment, suggesting in each instance something inexplicable, enigmatic and mysterious. For instance, when he goes to meet Gargi at Benaras the second time, her bare squarish room but for its stained glass ventilators which resemble those in Lal Haveli, looks like a labyrinth to him, may be because of his splitting headache. Then again, when he is convalescing after a near fatal illness, he broods over Anuradha, his "dark and terrible love", "the unbearable entanglements" he has been led into by what he regards as his "inherited" afflictions, and the rather enigmatic reaction of his wife Geeta's to his liason with Anuradha. In this mood it seems to him that the labyrinth "stretches to the Maya (ie. His residence in Bombay), to Geeta, to the very edges of this beach", close to his home. Som's mind itself, its "going forward and backward and sideways", resembles a labyrinth. He fancies that if someone, man or god, watched his life from a great height, he would appear as insignificant "as an ant, threading through a maze, knocking about, against one wall, then another". In short the world of Som is as tortuous and winding, full of dark and intricate alleys, as the location of Lal Haveli and its labyrinthine interior.

Lal Haveli as a labyrinth could be emblematic of the world. The recurrent use of the image of labyrinth in the novel strongly suggests that life in this world is viewed as a questing
journey through a baffling labyrinth in which most people wander and knock about unable to find the way out of it or find what they want in it. Bhaskar Senior's quest for the First Cause was as tortuous as a labyrinth, and his search was in vain. To a lesser degree was Leela Sabnis's life labyrinthine and unfulfilled, despite her Cartesian confidence and passion to explain everything intellectually. Som's own insane and infatuated pursuit of Anuradha who fascinates and baffles him, his jealous attempts to possess her, body and soul, and his bizarre journey to the hills in search of the missing shares of Aftab in a vengeful spirit, all are labyrinthine.

It is to be noted that it is the stranger and uninitiated person that gets confused in a labyrinthine home and comes back again and again to where he started from. But for those who designed and built Lal Haveli and for Aftab and Anuradha who live there, it presents no problems. They know the way in as well as the way out of it. For them and for the pilgrims who visit Benaras, despite its criss-cross of lanes, presents no problems. They feel quite at home there. To the fevered imagination of Som, however, there is hardly anything which is not labyrinthine. It is Aftab who tells Som that death is the last labyrinth. Som is impressed and puzzled at the same time by the answer. Death lurks in the decrepit Lal Haveli and its dead surroundings. Som is frightened out of his wits when he runs into a sarcophagus as he walks through the maze of Haveli. And he loathes the sight of cenotaphs and gravestones during his visit to the dargah. His excessive fear of death suggests a fear of living, and of living in a world which does not seem to have any meaning or purpose for him. His physician K who understands the nature of malady tells him: "--- all in all, it is not death but life that you are bothered about". To the old man who is carried in 'palki' all the way from distant Jaipur
to the mountain lake traversing nearly a thousand miles, only because he wishes to die near it. death is no frightening labyrinth nor a dead end but a passage which opens on to something beyond. Som’s encounter with this stranger who looks forward to his death, fills him with wonder and fear. The young boy, who accompanies his old grand father, to the lake, presents another puzzle to Som. To this boy too death is no terror, though he is grief-stricken by the old man’s death at the appointed hour. Som wonders at the “equanimity” of the boy as he watches the proceedings of the funeral. Even the sceptical Som is momentarily lifted out of himself as he watches the proceedings of the solemn ritualistic cremation, and feels along with the funeral party that he too has been transported to another world, "free from fear"." But soon after he lapses into his former morbid self. He remains a stranger to the world of these people, and even to the world of Aftab, Anuradha, and Gargi. His sense of the labyrinth persists.

Krishna the elusive God, to whom so many including Som’s mother, Anuradha and her insane mother, Aftab and a host of others are devoted, and who to Som’s utter bafflement and confusion appears as a tall and steady blue flame in the mountain temple, is yet another labyrinth. Enough has been said so far about the labyrinthine nature of Som’s mind, his movements and struggles, and his view of life as a groping in a baffling labyrinth. It remains to be pointed out that the novel itself has a complicated structure and is mimetic of a labyrinth. Som’s diary, which faithfully reflects his mind and records all his neurotic troubles, his sterile self-examination, curative confessions, his listless meanderings at different stages of his life, and the unexpected shifts of time and place in his train of thought and recollections, is given by the novelist a corresponding labyrinthine structure. The pertinent observation of Ramesh Srivastava regarding this aspect may be adduced here:

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Like a lost person wandering endlessly in the labyrinth till the very end, the action of the novel shifts from one place to another till the novel is concluded. The structure of the novel gives the appearance of literary labyrinth in which the hero is shifting perpetually from one place to the other as if playing the game of hide and seek while the reader puzzlingly tries to locate him, trace his footsteps, visualise his moves and keep guessing.\textsuperscript{48}

It is possible to see in the fictional context, as suggested by T. Padma,\textsuperscript{49} another dimension of meaning to death apart from the death of physical life which obsesses Som. It is spiritual death from which Anuradha tries to rescue Som. This other death is caused by lust, anger, greed, desire, pride and jealousy, all demons born out of man’s ego-centricty, and lurk in the labyrinth of his mind. Traditionally they are known as \textit{Arishadvarga}, the six enemies of man. All of them are in Som who, in spite of his attempts to solve the problems of universe, remains selfish, vain, proud, conceited, lustful, possessive and jealous. They inflate his ego. He has to struggle against and conquer them if he ever were to find answers to his teasing questions. He hardly succeeds in it. Even his love for Anuradha is tainted by his self-centredness. His charity too is smudged by it. At the fete for the dead of war where he goes to donate some money, apparently out of some social concern for the unfortunate war widows, he becomes impatient because Mrs. Bedi who is to receive the cheque does not appear before him at once: “Why couldn’t they make her stand in the front? Twenty thousand rupees was no chicken feed. I gave her two minutes to show up. Two minutes or I would go. I had betters things to do”.\textsuperscript{50} His ego has to die if he has to free himself from this predicament and also become genuinely involved in the lives of others and in society. This is the substance of the
verse of Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki which Amjad Mian at the dargah quotes: "When the dagger of submission has killed you, there will come new lives from unseen worlds."  

Som's spiritual estrangement and nowhereness constitute the heart of the novel. His social isolation and estrangement are very considerably a consequence of his spiritual uprootedness and estrangement. It is also due to his self-absorption and the consequent indifference towards others. He is rarely seen, if at all, to care for others or feel for them. There is no tangible reason or cause for this unconcern except that he is wholly engrossed with himself. All his desires and obsessions are egotistical. His business dealings are Darwinian in the sense that they are based on the principle of survival of the fittest, which is amoral, ethically neutral and its own justification. Questions about the propriety of the means employed to achieve the ends are not asked, since such questions apparently have no place there, since self-advancement and profit are the sole motives of the enterprise. When Som goes about grabbing company after company he does not seem to be aware at all of the dehumanising aspect of his business ventures, and the harm it does to him and to the society to which he belongs. He even takes a cruel delight in buying away all the shares of Aftab's company and ruin it because of jealousy. He looks upon Aftab as his rival and sworn enemy although in actual fact Aftab is the injured party. It is as if he makes himself the centre of the universe and looks at others and the world from the point of view of his own needs and urges. Conceited to the core, he has a low opinion of most people, until he meets Anuradha and Gargi, and feels compelled from within to seek Gargi who makes an extraordinary impact on him.
Except his personal physician K who serves as his angelic guardian on the earth. Som hardly cultivates anyone else or makes friends with them. He does not fit into any group because he is always conscious of his separateness from it. How contemptuous he can be towards others whom he regards as his inferiors, may be seen from a few of his jottings in his diary. Here is a sample. From the window of the hospital where he has been admitted for heart ailment, he looks at the world outside:

I felt a new loathing for the squalid world that carried on beneath my hospital window. All those buses and cars and taxis and men scurrying back and forth like cockroaches. For what? But if it was loathing, then why that longing to get right back among the vermin as soon as possible?52

Even making allowance that it is a sick man who looks at the world, does not take away the implied contempt for people.

As Som becomes more and more aware of his loneliness and spiritual isolation, he feels the need for support and trust. What is more he expects it to be given to him. He finds in his wife Geeta one who “trusts like birds fly, like fish swim”.53 Not a word of protest or complaint ever escapes from her, despite his vagaries, erratic behaviour and fornications of which she is only too well aware. But he is not sufficiently appreciative of it and tends to take her for granted. He does not trust anyone and fails to realise that trust begets trust. And he remains a stranger to both trust and faith till the end. The fact is that to trust others he has to forget himself at least for a while. That is where he fails. Therefore he remains lonely and friendless wherever he is. He fails to make friends because he cannot. He experiences this
deficiency in him most acutely in the city of Bombay where he continues to make his fortune, and he himself is aware of it, as the following extract from his diary reveals it:

I needed the trust — who doesn’t? I needed all the more because I did not trust myself, or my men, or my fate, or the ceaseless travel on the social wheel. Between the empty home and the cluttered offices — so many men, unknown, unknowable, each with a quiver of axes to grind — between these two poles of existence, friendless in a city that I did not love and which, for that matter, did not love me, even though it eyed my money, in this whore of a city what I needed most was to be reassured that all was well.54

The above passage amply testifies to his loneliness in society and his cynical view of it.

Som fares no better in his family, which is the smallest unit of society and the most readily accessible where the closer of human relations can be established and a sense of participating in a community fostered. He rarely thinks of his children. He takes his ever-watchful and devoted wife, his physician K and Thapar who managed his finances for granted. How extensive is his sense of loneliness and how deeply it has cut into his being may be gauged by his feeling lonely even in the company of Anuradha with whom he is most intimate, his wife Geeta, and his friend Leela Sabnis all of whom feel great concern for him and would gladly do their best to help him out of the morass he has been in. He feels that he is unable to communicate with any of them. Even after having spent some moments of intense passion with Anuradha, he feels alone. He writes in his diary: "— perhaps, the silence, as usual, was only on my side. I never felt more alone than when locked in this, the most intimate of dialogue. I knew that. Others — Geeta and Leela — had perhaps sensed the aloneness and had
left it undisturbed for fear of disturbing more than they could handle ——.55 He is so constantly haunted by the feeling of being lonely that neither drink nor the gratification of the hunger of the body or any other sensuous pleasure can remove it. When he listens to the music of Azizun in the friendly company of Aftab and Anuradha, not only do they all appear remote but he is reminded of “that core of loneliness around which all of us are built ——”.56 But it should be noted that this generalisation of Som's on universal loneliness is a mere projection of his own experience rather than based on his understanding of others. In fact he is aware of his loneliness only and has no notion at all of others’ sense of it, how keenly they experience it, and the causes for it. He is aware only of his own loneliness. Once on one of the ghats of the Ganga where a carnival is on, he stands in the midst of the crowd, “aware neither of Anuradha nor the carnival nor of (his) bearings”, but “only aware that (he) stood far from home, in a most desolate place, from where there could be no rescue”.57

Som remains a stranger, an outsider, to society and its activities from first to last. The other protagonists, Sindi, Billy and Ratan also have their experience of being lonely and estranged from society for reasons and pressures, apart from personal factors, social and circumstantial. Outwardly Sindi has a successful social life, and participates in parties, picnics and gatherings, whether in America or India. But inwardly he remains withdrawn because he is afraid of involvement with people and in society because of certain inhibitions and painful experiences, past and present. He remains, as he believes, detached and uninvolved until certain other circumstances in India make it necessary for him to break out of his shell and choose between non-involvement and participation in society. And he opts for the latter and is all the better for it. Billy and Ratan (and to some extent Sindi too) have their quarrel with
society. Billy in particular (as it will be seen in more detail in the next chapter which is concerned with him) revolts deliberately and determinedly against his society and its false values. He feels lonely and isolated in his society. Therefore he seeks and finds in a tribal community the kind of society he wants with which he identifies himself, in spite of the risks involved in it. Ratan feels lonely and isolated and somewhat estranged from his better self because of his guilty conscience for having done a series of wrongs and flouted the real values of life. But having realised his guilt, he repents, and by a conscientious effort works himself towards reintegration with his society with a sharpened awareness of his responsibilities towards it. The social environment in which all the three – Sindi, Billy and Ratan – live affects them deeply. It is the pressures exerted and demands made on them by their milieus that engage them in the quest for the meaning of life and their identity. From time to time and in different ways they examine where and how they stand in relation to their society. They realise the meaning and purpose of life and overcome their sense of loneliness and isolation when they are fully integrated with society and are back in its fold.

In all these respects Som Bhaskar differs completely from his counterparts. As seen in the preceding pages, he becomes socially and spiritually estranged for reasons personal and psychological rather than social. Again, purely personal factors set him on the quest for the meaning of life and existence. Society is never his adversary as it is for the other protagonists. It hardly appears in his reckoning. He is divided self and at war with himself. All of his perplexities and puzzles spring from his spiritual rootlessness. His dilemmas are not due to the failure of human relationships as in the case of Sindi, or of the society itself as in the case of Billy and Ratan. He is hardly at odds with society or aware of its sordidness. His anguish
is caused not by the chaos of the outside world but by the chaos within himself. Sanjay Narasimhaiah has remarked that “there is no society as such in the novel, there are only individuals scattered around”. But this statement would be correct if looked at exclusively from Som’s jaundiced point of view. But there is a sense of community and society as the fictional context shows, in Benaras and also in Bombay. It can be felt in the gatherings at the Janmastami celebrations in Benaras, the fete for the dead of war in Bombay, and at the hill shrine to which Som goes in search of Aftab’s shares. Dedication to humanitarian cause, and ecstatic devotion to Krishna bind them all into a society. But it is not given in this novel the prominence it has in the other novels of Joshi. The reason is obvious. Som, whose story it is and from whose point of view it is narrated, is hardly aware of it any time, as pointed out already. He does not care for it and even ignores it. The superficial fashionable social life, of which there must have been plenty in Bombay and Delhi in which he participates, is of no interest or consequence to him especially from the time he becomes infatuated with Anuradha. Only once, and for a brief while, he experiences the vitality of Bombay in the company of Leela Sabnis. Therefore he has hardly any sense of society, a community and gathering of people of shared human concerns.

It has been remarked that Joshi has totally ignored making even a passing reference to the problems that Som must have faced naturally as an industrialist in his workaday world, like Mr. Khemka in The Foreigner. But this remark misses the point of the novel. It is clear from the first that the focus is on Som’s malady and spiritual opacity rather than on his economic problems or sociological concerns. One has to assume therefore that Som must have tackled those problems, if any, successfully either himself or through his able assistants like Thapar.
Otherwise he could not have prospered. However he begins to lose all interest in his enterprises, and becomes almost totally indifferent to them from the time he becomes obsessed with Anuradha and wants to possess the whole of her. When Thapar, who manages his financial affairs cautions him against buying off at any cost Aftab’s shares especially when there is not enough liquidity in their companies, Som angrily and rashly orders him to mortgage the plants and raise the money required. Thereafter nothing more is said about it.

To dwell on these and other activities of Som unconnected with his perplexities would be strictly not relevant for the narrative. Therefore it is appropriate that they are left out.

Som is so much preoccupied with himself that he does not feel any sense of relatedness to others, except perhaps to his wife and his parents who are dead. Of course Anuradha comes to occupy him entirely, awake or asleep. But that again is a peculiar and obsessive attachment, self-centred and possessive utterly. Their relationship is special and has to be looked into more closely. So is his relation to Gargi in a different way, and in her presence alone he feels somewhat humble and opens up almost like a child. It also needs particular attention. Barring these two, Som continuously preoccupied with himself, hardly thinks of anyone else. He does not belong to any group and cannot identify himself with any, though he harps upon his loneliness. He keeps himself aloof and apart from others. During the Janmastami celebrations in Benaras he refuses to enter the temple, feeling very superior to others whom he regards as ridiculous and absurd. He sits apart while they go into the temple. Only once he is lifted above his narrow self and feels one with those who are present at the cremation of the old man near the hill shrine. It never occurs to him that whatever he does.
touched others somewhere, whether known or unknown to him. It is as if he exists for himself alone, although he lives and moves among people in society.

Som's being overcome by a feeling of loneliness is also due to the fact that he is wholly without the related values, symbols and patterns of his society which, had he chosen to share, would have given him a feeling of communion and belonging. His problem is that he is not sure of himself. He does not know what he wants or what to believe. He remains therefore a soul divided against himself, a stranger to his own soul. The fact that he is aware of it makes his condition pathetic. Shared communal customs, conventions, beliefs and traditions are a tremendous binding and unifying force especially in a traditional society like India. In the absence of this cementing force Som becomes displaced and uprooted spiritually and culturally, estranged from his essential self and society. In fact in his plight he is very much like many a modern, educated, Westernised, and urbanised Indian who too has lost his moorings. Thereby he is deprived of the deepest needs of man, the need to relate himself to the world outside him. The means by which he could have achieved it are there within his reach. It is for him to make up his mind and reach out to them. But that is precisely what he fails to do. He is like a thirsty man with a parched tongue finding or unwilling to quench his thirst with it. The assurance he longs for he could have found and what may be called his socialisation would have been possible to his advantage had he taken some interest in others, made an effort to share their concerns, and in addition listened to Gargi's advice that he should be guided by Anuradha whom she characterises as his "shakti".60
This brings us to a consideration of Som’s relation to Anuradha and Gargi who is the mentor of Anuradha as well as Aftab. The relationship in each case is special and distinct. Both influence him deeply and Anuradha in particular extraordinarily. All the questions, doubts, fears, misgivings and undefined “wants” of Som which have been harassing him for long get sharply focussed from the time he gets to know them. Each in her own way does her best to help Som to find a centre and a spiritual anchor to his confused and distracted life. His involvement with Anuradha is the most complex of his personal relationships in which the erotic, the sensual and the spiritual are inseparably intertwined. What begins as a chance meeting between them at a reception in Delhi’s Inter-Continental Hotel, where in her antique costume and jewellery she appears as an anachronism to him, soon develops into an intense romantic attachment for both. It becomes for him an irresistible infatuation and fixation and for her one of self-sacrificing love. His love for her being self-centred and extremely possessive unlike hers for him, it does not sublimate his consuming passion or liberate him. Instead it freezes him.

Som goes to Benaras ostensibly to buy off Aftab’s shares but actually for her sake, in spite of his loathing of Benaras and the Haveli. At one stage of their relationship to drive out of his mind all obsessive thoughts of her, resist her hold on him and flush her out of his systems as it were, Som goes on a hectic and extensive tour of Europe, America and round the world along with his wife. But it is of no avail. However much he might try he cannot disengage himself from thoughts of Anuradha and the compulsive desire to possess all of her, wherever he may be. He clings on to her with an unusual fierceness for fear of losing her, and throws the entire and desperate weight of his turbulence on her. She becomes more and more
indispensable to him and the very centre of his existence. He comes to believe that she could be the means of his ultimate redemption from the “wants”, and may well provide the answers to his perplexing questions. Therefore he pursues her hysterically and relentlessly, despite it being a tortuous experience for him.

Som is sensible enough to perceive that there is something deeper than mere carnal desires in Anuradha. Her gaze seems to have been “forged for carrying out the transactions of the soul”. He also recognises that there is something elusive and mysterious about her which one may never fathom: “She was like the ocean; one could never reach the bottom of her”. This thought comes to him when she surprises him by her seemingly casual but profound remark, “Maybe Krishna begins where Darwin left off”. Later, she sends him through Aftab a silver image of Krishna and wants him to keep it with him always. It is not known what he does with it. There is no reference to it in his diary again. It is not unlikely that he discards it. Anuradha’s unqualified devotion to Krishna is something Som cannot understand or appreciate. It seems ridiculous to him. And it makes him jealous too: “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”. On the Janmashtami day in Benaras she dresses herself as if for a wedding. Oblivious of the smell and dirt around her she goes from shrine to shrine, “suffused with a strange ecstatic glow”, muttering prayers and making offerings at every shrine, while the sceptical and cynical Som follows her, disgusted and contemptuous of it all. Such is his self-centredness that he wants her to understand his needs and oblige him, but he never even tries to know what her needs are.
To rescue Anuradha, apparently, from the “filth and humbug”, perversion, “disease and bankruptcy” of Benaras, but actually to have her exclusively for himself, Som hustles her off to a beautiful valley in the snow-covered hills. It is his hope that no one would know about her there, nor would she think of anyone else there to distract her from loving him. But in a drunken state she startles him by telling him of the temple in the mountain lined with lepers, and wants him to go with her there so that “God will cure (him)”. Som is both angry and disappointed with her for “dragging God into that room” and spoiling completely the satisfaction of his “wildest fantasies”. But at that moment he does not know that at a later day he actually will have to visit the mountain shrine along with his physician friend K and go through some elusive and baffling experiences which he cannot reason out or understand. His coming across on the way to the mountain shrine an old man who is brought these in a litter all the way from Jaipur only because he wishes to die near the mountain lake, has already been referred to. Som’s encounter with the dying old man’s grandson on this occasion deserves to be noted because it exposes his self-centredness. He finds the boy looking eagerly into the mountain stream for a rare pebble with a star at its centre, because his grandmother wanted him to look for it. To Som this appears to be nothing but contaminating and corrupting the boy’s mind and causing his moral depravity. To his question what would he do if did not find the pebble, the boy replies, “Even then it is all right”. Som does not realise the significance of this disarming answer. It is in complete contrast to his selfish attempt to possess Aftab’s shares and Anuradha, only to avenge himself on the what he regards as the wrongs done to him. At the shrine itself he is puzzled as well as surprised to find not an idol or icon for the deity (Krishna) only a steadily burning dazzling blue flame taller than himself.
Anuradha understands very clearly almost from the start Som's limitations and the nature of his malady, despite her love for him or perhaps because of it. On an occasion she tells him clearly, "It is not me you want -- you badly want something. I could see that the first time we met. But it is not me". When he mocks at her faith in Krishna and her belief in miracles she reprovingly remarks to him, almost puncturing his intellectual conceit at the same time: "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". And she offers to help him to find the way out of the labyrinth of his misapprehensions and deeprooted malaise by her love for him and faith in the divine. But he rejects it with disdain.

Anuradha's is a life of untold suffering and night-marish experiences even from her childhood onwards, which have injured her mind and body alike lastingly. It is remarkable that she herself tells Som briefly about them without any trace of self-pity and melodrama. It is very much unlike him because he tends to dwell on his sufferings, real and imaginary, and seems to nourish his wounds. As Som's physician K, who seems to know all about her, puts it:

You know --- my life has been spent amidst misery and suffering but I know of no other human being who suffered as much as Anuradha --- illegitimate child, insane mother, no home. Molested as a child. Witness to murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world. After her mother's death, even "the gutter is denied to her".

At the convent school in Bombay she suffers indignities and insults. She cannot make a single friend and is left desperately lonely. After a couple of years in the amoral and dubious cinema
world, she has a couple of years of happiness with Aftab. Actually she is drawn to him because she sees Gargi in him. But with Aftab’s going to pieces after his father’s death, his losing his eyesight, and she herself losing her looks because of small-pox, she even attempts suicide.\textsuperscript{73} K, who is anything but sentimental, would not have made these observations on Anuradha had he not known how hers was one of the most battered lives. Her mother’s and her own excruciating suffering, and her unswerving faith in Krishna, neither of which Som has ever known or experienced or understood, have brought her an understanding of the fundamental aspects of life. She had every justifiable reason to become cynical and vengeful towards society and people in view of what she had gone through. But she does not, nor does she resort to self-pity. In striking contrast to Som’s unrelieved restlessness, discontent, disbelief and frustration, she remains detached and composed and secure in her faith until she comes into contact with Som which causes in her a disturbance almost equal to his. But he is all self-centredness, conceit and possessiveness, while she is the very opposite.

As one who combines in herself antiquity and modernity, piety and unconventional morals, untold suffering and unqualified faith, Anuradha remains a paradox and an enigma, particularly to Som. In the end he has to admit to himself his own inadequacy to understand her and deal with her. She towers head and shoulders above him and many others like him. There is a tragic dignity about her. She endeavours to help Som to know himself. For his sake she takes many risks too. If he fails, the blame is his and not hers or anyone else’s. For all her unconventionality, there is in her an unmatched and transparent honesty, frankness, sincerity and purity which Som’s wife Geeta, who ought to be aggrieved, recognises and even respects. She understands her with a rare sympathy. It is significant that she does not criticize
or complain against this enigmatic mistress and lover of her husband's. When Anuradha disappears from his sight and life, he becomes unhinged. Such has been his dependence on her that he raves and is driven to near madness. He feels that he is at the end of his tether. He is filled with impotent anger and thoughts of revenge, and wants to spite both her and Aflab.

It is through Anuradha and Aflab that Som makes the acquaintance of Gargi, the daughter of a sufi and herself a mystic through deaf-mute. Joshi seems to have given intentionally this significant Upanisadic name of Gargi to this enigmatic character of his. A certain aura of mystery surrounds her. She is the very image of composure and compassion. She has profound sympathy and understanding for those who are in spiritual distress. As their spiritual guide she is an enormous source of sustenance to Aflab and Anuradha. She is a very influential and a reassuring presence to all those who come into contact with her, including Som who feels her silent impact at once. Through gestures and occasionally by writing a brief note on her pad, she communicates with those who come to her for solace and advice. She is always of just a few words though she listens to others with great care and attention watching closely their lip movement. Even at his first unexpected meeting with her in a cottage on the other bank of the Ganga, Som is deeply impressed by her "charming" "warm and generous smile", the like of which he has not seen for a long time. She looks at him a long time as one might at an old acquaintance. She appears to radiate calm and poise of mind. In retrospect it appears to Som that perhaps the weakening of his will regarding the capture of Aflab's company even months after he set about it, has been due to her silent and subtle influence on him.
Gargi has an uncanny capacity to draw people to herself effortlessly and make them confide in her on their own. It is amazing that she can make people talk in her presence without reserve, despite her being a deaf mute. During his second visit to her Som who is generally indifferent towards gods, godmen and godwomen, and even contemptuous of them, tells her unprompted about himself, his parents and their preoccupations. He feels at home with her. In her presence he becomes humble, and his challenging and defiant attitude gets softened. He feels confident that “she understands --- the only one who understands” him. His first few visits to her were in the company of Aftab and Anuradha. But most of his subsequent visits are entirely on his own. He seeks her with the hope that she might cure him of his malaise, and provide answers to his questions. He talks to her without prompting almost as in a confessional: “I am fed up of this restlessness. So absolutely fed up. Can you help me?” She is deeply touched and understands that he needs a prop. So, she writes on her pad: “God will send someone to help you --- Someone who has known suffering”. To his question, “But if there is no God?”, her answer is a quiet smile.

On another occasion, almost like a schoolboy Som displays before Gargi his knowledge of the different phases of the evolution of life on the earth. He just does not know why he does it. She merely allows him to talk without contradicting or interrupting him. Both Som and K are surprised to find her in the room close to the mountain temple when they go there. It is as if she is found everywhere. According to their guide Vasudev, she is known to everyone there. On this occasion too her understanding and intelligent eyes evoke in Som “the overwhelming compulsion to talk and talk and talk”.

He feels relieved and reassured in her presence. Even the generally reticent K opens up and speaks to her at length about what has puzzled him for
long, namely Som’s recovery from his fatal illness. He wants to know from her whether she, implored and prevailed upon by Anuradha, had saved. Som, on the condition that she would give him up for ever, by exercising her special powers during his recent illness when he was dead for all practical purposes according to expert medical opinion. This revelation comes as a terrible shock to Som. Gargi politely declines to answer K. At no time she makes any claims for herself and does not mind whether the respectful agnostic K or ever-doubting Som believes or not that a miracle took place to save him. Her views or opinions often are expressed as suggestions rather than prescriptions or assertions. It is for others to accept or reject them according to their understanding and judgment. Her sympathetic concern for them however remains unchanged.

Som meets Gargi again all by himself the next morning of their visit to the mountain shrine to collect package of shares left by Anuradha, and also to get her to explain whether she and Anuradha really did “something” to save him. Their conversation is very significant and revelatory. Som admits that he bought the shares because he had “a score to settle with Aftab and Anuradha”. He did not like the way Anuradha had “ditched” him after his illness. But after listening to K’s account of his apparently miraculous recovery, he is left confused. It appears to be only a “gimmick” to him. He is unconvinced. Now he wants to know from Gargi what actually happened and what should he do with the shares. In response to his questions she merely writes on her pad, “There is no harm in believing that God exists”. She implies perhaps that there are limits to human reason which by itself cannot answer all the vexed and vexing questions of man. He has to rise above the limits of discursive reason to
reach the realm of faith. But it is not to deny the necessity and value of reason, nor is faith set up as its opposite.

Obviously Som is not satisfied with this oblique reply of Gargi’s. He continues: “I want to know. Probably, I want to believe. But --- I must have evidence --- In the absence of evidence I intend to challenge the whole thing. I want to take not only those shares but also Anuradha”. Gargi laugh at his outburst and writes on her pad this salutary piece of advice: “God does not work in this simple manner. God does not seek revenge. Man’s vanity (ahamkar) brings him revenge enough”.81 She hints that the root cause for all of his sufferings is his egocentricity and that revenge is not the way of those who seek answers to the riddle of life. Elucidating her meaning further she writes: “We are all children trying to reach up to a crack in the door to peep into a room”. But to Som her note reads like “a coded instruction to a mysterious destination”.82 He decides to take the shares without ever realising that in gifting them to him Anuradha has made yet another extraordinary gesture of self-denial and sacrifice. Gargi understands his dilemma, his agony and the poignancy of his predicament. She merely pats him on his cheek and makes a gesture as of a blessing when he touches her feet before leaving.

The ever-doubting Som wonders whether Gargi herself knows for certain what she is talking about. However he rightly understands that the answers to his questions have to be found by himself, and that by his own effort he has to reach up to the crack in the door to have a peep into the room. And he prefers to doubt and be sceptical, rather than try faith and belief. After his return from the mountain shrine, Som goes to the Haveli to make one more attempt to
find and possess Anuradha. He cannot believe that she has really decided to go out of his life for good, sacrificing what she desires most. As for himself he cannot live without her. Sensing danger to his life Anuradha who appears just for a moment hustles him out of the Haveli. Thereafter she herself vanishes and never returns, snapping all links with him forever so that he may live. How much Som is shaken, and feels helpless and desolate without her is revealed by his apostrophe to her. Ironically it is a prayer to her rather than to God. One of the first entries in his diary is: “If I believed in God I could pray, may be run a rosary through my fingers. But that’s out ---”. Now he desperately appeals to her wherever she may be:

Anuradha, listen. Listen to me wherever you are. Is there a God where you are? Have you met Him? Does He have a face? Does He speak? Does He hear? Does He understand the language that we speak? --- 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.\footnote{It is very clear that this prayer of Som’s is wrung out of his weary and anguished being. It reveals most forcefully his unresolved dilemma, his need for a faith that lies beyond mere reasoning, and at the same time his obstinate unwillingness to try out one. It also indicates that he has reached a point when he cannot rely wholly on reason but is not ready on his own to make the leap to transcended it limits. He can neither believe nor disbelieve and remain courageously and confidently in a state of unbelief. He remain encumbered in his self, in his ahamkar lonely and isolated, and frustrated without the one and only support he had, that of...}
Anuradha. Oscillating between the two points of belief and unbelief, Som cannot be said to preserve the integrity of his self. On the other hand Anuradha led by her faith, consciously and deliberately takes the crucial decision to plunge herself apparently into the unknown terrain so that Som may live. By this supreme act of self-abnegation and sacrifice she asserts and preserves the integrity of her self. In this final act of hers, she demonstrates how in her self she has fused both matter and spirit, Som fails to recognise this fact though he has been looking for someone who could combine these two. Had he understood properly Gargi’s advice to him that Anuradha was his ‘shakthi’ and he should be guided by her, his life in all likelihood would have taken a different turn for the better. He would have freed himself from his crushing sense of loneliness and isolation and incidentally integrated himself with his society.

The Last Labyrinth recreates authentically the protagonist Som’s egotistical predicament and gives the reader the actual feel of what it is to be lonely and lost in the labyrinth of one’s own consciousness, its contentious thoughts and doubts. Despite his realizing the inadequacy of Leela Sabnis’s Cartesian approach to his problems, and his fortunate association with Geeta, Gargi, and above all Anuradha, and their living example, he remains in a state of doubt and uncertainty, and a lonely and estranged man. Even after tireless search and movement from person to person and from place to place for answers to his questions, he comes back to the same “void” and unfulfilled hunger he started from. It is true that he is given to ceaseless introspection, has an analytical and ratiocinative mind, and is constantly agitated by questions about the meaning of life and what lies beyond death. It is also true that he does not seek easy answers to his questions. But all this is not enough to maintain that he had the Upanishadic spirit of dispassionate inquiry which his father had in an estimable degree.
He is essentially unsteady and unstable, often carried away by his infatuations. Therefore to see in him, as Hari Mohan Prasad "a modern, empirical, sceptical Nachiketa" is rather farfetched. Nachiketa chooses to walk the razor's edge. Som is never capable of that spirit. He is more like Triśanku, as pointed out earlier.

Som has to surrender his ego if he has to find relief and illumination. But the stubborn egotist that he is, that is just what he fails to do. Even after all that he has gone through, he remains unforgiving and unforgetting, and still thinks of settling scores with Aftab and Anuradha. In all his cogitations, he has in mind only himself rather than Man or fellow human beings. There is hardly an instance in his entire minutes-book, of his thinking of any other person than himself with any interest or concern, forgetting himself for the moment. Even Anuradha is not made an exception. His thoughts about her are anything but self-less. Even after coming to know the miseries and agonies she has gone through, he does not appear to give any thought to her suffering and humiliation and to the tragic side of her life. One, who does not at all try to go out of the narrow orbit of his own life anytime, can hardly have any concern for others. Som fails to make any sense of his life and self because he fails to involve his self in the family and society, two significant ways open to him. Notwithstanding his encounter with the world of Aftab, Anuradha, Gargi and the like, he remains fundamentally the same man lonely, hungry for love, lost in the maze of endless questioning, and alienated from himself and his community. Reportedly Arun Joshi in reply to a question by Gopal Reddy in 1981 wrote: "--- alienation of my characters in the novels which I have written so far ultimately leads them back to community. I realized that in --- The Last Labyrinth for the first time does not happen".
Som’s failure to resolve his dilemmas is his individual failure. His inability to recognise that there is a valid life of the spirit which seeks the transcendental, forms an aspect of his life. He lives a life of illusions, of indecision and negation. Underlying all his doubting and questioning is his conceit. If there are moments in his life of humility, as in the immediate presence of Gargi, they are very few and soon overshadowed by his “vanity” (ahamkar). No doubt, he suffers and is anguished by the questions for which he does not get answers acceptable to him. Others like Aftab, and Anuradha too suffer, Anuradha in particular for whose suffering there is no parallel in the novel. But they learn from suffering and enrich their understanding of themselves and others. But Som fails in this regard. Sanjay Narasimhaiah has aptly remarked on this aspect of Som’s character: “A study of Som’s character shows that introspection is itself not enough unless there is strength of mind to fiercely alter one’s living, thinking and being. It can be an indulgence too for when one expects him to suffer and learn he gives himself to defiance.”

The Last Labyrinth does not pretend to solve the mysteries of life, death, existence and God. Nothing is asserted regarding the answers to the questions raised by Som. But it brings us of the present day a sharpened awareness of them through the protagonist who raises the questions about those with a peculiar urgency. The worlds of reason and faith are presented as seen through the eyes of Som who is left free to make his choice and draw his conclusions. While it is implied that the riddles of life cannot be resolved by Cartesian reasoning and logic alone, their value, usefulness and place are neither denied nor under-rated. It is suggested that faith is a possible alternative to Som’s reasoning which is inadequate, but is not certainly to be
understood as a denial or rejection of reason. The novel leaves no doubt what ever regarding how disastrous blind faith can be if its nature and function are not properly understood. It was such faith in Krishna that precipitated Som’s mother’s illness and drove her to death. Miracles and extra-sensory perception are mentioned but one is free to believe them or not. Gargi’s evasion to answer whether she had worked any miracle to save Som from his fatal illness is a case in point. There are some truths which have to be known experientially as the allusion to Yagnavalkya-Gargi myth implies. It is also made absolutely clear that genuine faith is not easily won. It requires humility, knowledge of suffering, and a readiness to rise above one’s self. One must be prepared to give away all that he has before he can receive. Som Bhaskar fails in this regard at all levels, personal, social and communal.

In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, to the taken up for study in the next chapter, Arun Joshi presents the story of a protagonist who is in many ways a complete and keen contrast to Some Bhaskar. Bimal or Billy Biswas, a man of extraordinary obsessions, rises to a true heroic stature by the nature of the choice he makes in his search for the meaning of self, society, civilization and life. Joshi presents from an unusual angle the interaction of self, family and society in this novel.
Notes and References


3. Ibid., p. 11.

4. Ibid., p. 9.

5. Ibid., p. 47.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 63.

8. Ibid., p. 11.

9. Ibid., p. 82.

10. Ibid., p. 19.

11. Ibid., p. 10.


14. The Last Labyrinth, p. 66.


17. Ibid., p. 11.

18. Ibid., p. 57.
19. Ibid., p. 22.
20. Ibid., p. 27.
22. Ibid., p. 27.
23. Ibid., p. 28.
24. Ibid., p. 25.
25. Ibid., p. 189.
26. Ibid., pp. 208-209.
27. Ibid., pp. 112-113.
28. Ibid., p. 213.
29. Ibid., p. 166.
30. Ibid., p. 81.
31. Ibid., p. 179.
33. The Last Labyrinth, p. 152.
35. The Foreigner, p. 68.
36. The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 8.
40. The Last Labyrinth, p. 34.
41. Ibid., p. 29.

42. Ibid., p. 97.

43. Ibid., pp. 156-157.

44. Ibid., p. 53

45. Ibid., p. 37.

46. Ibid., p. 203.

47. Ibid., p. 194


50. The Last Labyrinth, p. 64.

51. Ibid., p. 16.

52. Ibid., pp. 46-47.

53. Ibid., p. 63.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., pp. 107-108.

56. Ibid., pp. 54-55.

57. Ibid., p. 102.


59. The Last Labyrinth, pp. 149-50.

60. Ibid., p. 121.
61. Ibid., p. 41.
62. Ibid., p. 132.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., p. 169.
65. Ibid., p. 133.
66. Ibid., p. 135.
67. Ibid., pp. 124-25.
68. Ibid., pp. 126-27
69. Ibid., p. 186.
70. Ibid., p. 208.
71. Ibid., pp. 58-59.
72. Ibid., p. 61.
73. Ibid., pp. 189-90.
74. Ibid., p. 50.
75. Ibid., p. 51.
76. Ibid., pp. 99.
77. Ibid., p. 118.
79. Ibid., p. 209.
80. Ibid., pp. 213.
81. Ibid., p. 214.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., p. 10.
84. Ibid., pp. 222-23.


86. V.V.N. Rajendra Prasad, p. 127.

87. V. Gopal Reddy, “From Alienation to Community: A Note on the Novels of Arun Joshi” P. 90.