CHAPTER III


Arun Joshi’s third novel *The Apprentice* (1974) is cast in the form of a dramatic monologue. It is a self analysis by Ratan, its protagonist of his own consciousness. Structurally it is similar to Albert Camus’ *The Fall*. But it differs from it in its emotional weight and quality of vision. The influence of the ‘Karmic’ principle of *The Gita* and that of Gandhi’s teachings are prominent in this novel. Like Arun Joshi’s other novels the present novel also probes deeper into the inner consciousness of the individual with a view to explore what Arun Joshi calls “the mysterious underworld which is the human soul” (Mathai 8).

It is very close to the existentialist philosophy, as Thakur Guruprasad says:

Ratan Rathor, the protagonist of the novel, conforms to the dot to the dictionary definition of ‘existential’ the doctrine that man forms his essence in the course of his life he chooses to lead. He is born a good man, the son of a martyr in the national movement. But when he goes out of his village to graduate in life of the crooked world, honesty doesn’t get him even the lowest job, and he makes his essence as he goes choosing the life he leads (9).

It is rendered in a confessional form, it is a telling commentary on the decaying values of a degenerating civilization. Any man who has a conscience must pay the price of his aware of his error. That is his punishment. Crisis in the soul of an individual, who is entangled in the maze of contemporary life
with its confusion of values and moral anarchy, and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi’s exploration of human reality in it. In it Joshi presents an individual who suffers the agony of the soul not due to his escapism or rebellion but due to his conformity to, and victimization by a crooked and corrupt society.

_The Apprentice_ is about a dark crisis in the human soul. It depicts the anguished attempt of a guilt-stricken individual to retrieve his innocence and honour. It is a story of crime and punishment, of dislocation and search for meaning. It portrays the effort of a ‘man without honour, shame, a man of our times’ to impose meaning and order on his life which lacks them. At the same time it is a severe criticism of a rotten society with its meaningless pursuit of success and career, unscrupulous amassing of wealth in defiance of the sanctified values of its tradition like honesty, integrity of character, self-less service, honour and more than this all of the human existence.

In the novel Ratan Rathor like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner and Jean–Baptiste–Clamence, the narrator of Albert Camus’ _The Fall_, discloses the secret of his existence because his sins of cowardice and dishonesty by exposing his own character in a mocking manner. He becomes a mirror of his contemporaries. D.R.Sharma observes _The Apprentice_ “as a study of the loss and the retrieval of one’s soul” (5). In it the confession comes to acquire the protagonist’s central concern, as Thakur Guruprasad remarks that “The narrator in this novel is an insistent confessionalist; confession is a factor in his redemption” (162). Ratan is thoroughly existentialist character who exemplifies
the doctrine that man’s salvation depends upon the course of life he chooses to lead. Neither is he a rebel like Billy Biswas nor a rootless foreigner like Sindi Oberoi. He is purely a practical man whose idealism is shattered by the materialistic attitudes like corruption in the modern urban middle class society. Post-Independence Indian society is the social background. Ratan is torn between ideologies like idealism and corruption or materialism and after much suffering he reaches a sort of salvation at the end when he decides to clean up the shoes of visitors at the Krishna temple steps. According to Ignac Fuerlicht “modern man may try and adjust to the “others” to society, to the system, abdicating his true self, or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and thus alienate himself from society (141). We find such type of alienation in Ratan Rathor. He begins his life with high ambitious and ideals to be honest, true to his self and like his father he would like to make a mark in the world. But he finds himself misfit in the modern world. He had to abdicate his true self to fit in the corrupt and ekeout a living. He is alienated from his true self in the process.

Ratan in the confessional mode narrates the whole story from his childhood, his father’s patriotism and sacrifice, his mother’s pragmatism, his miserable journey or hunting in search of a job, his job, marriage, his devaluation by taking bribe, Indo-china war, his closest friend Brigadier’s plight and death, his realization and repentance in the form of wiping shoes of congregation at the Krishna temple steps. He narrates to a silent listener – a
student who has come from Punjab to Delhi to rehearse for the N.C.C. parade on the Republic Day at Delhi.

Ratan is the product of double inheritance – the patriotic and ideal world of his father and the selfish, sagacious or pragmatic world of his mother. His father was a prosperous advocate. He was very much impressed by Gandhi’s philosophy and thought, so, by giving up his practice and personal life he participated in Gandhi’s freedom struggle. He was shot dead by a British sergeant while leading a procession of freedom fighters. Ratan would like to make a mark of his own like his father. He decides to join the army of Subhash Bose. His father’s death creates so many problems to him. His mother brings him face to face with horrible reality of the materialistic society, she asks him “Don’t fool yourself son”, she said, “Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but, the greatest of them all was money” (19). His mother expect that he should have to follow her principles to lead good life. According to her following the the principles of her dead husband was nothing but madness “It was not patriotism but money that brought respect and security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws, but money was law unto itself” (19).

Ratan grows up as a young one. First for him his father’s ideals were his own ideals. But after his father’s death his family suffered a lot of miseries, money problem, he is unable even to take treatment of his tubercular mother. His mother’s advise awares in him the awareness that money is the most important determinant of human life and Ratan treats it as his own vision, the
guiding principle of his life. He regards as if it was the ultimate truth uttered by some divine power in the form of his mother:

It was as though an oracle had spoken and revealed to me the mystery of the Universe. I felt very sad and helpless, I felt as though I had lost all control over my destiny which from then on would be governed not by what I worked for or how good I was put by some intricate laws of money of which I had no knowledge (19).

After the completion of his education Ratan struggles for a job, he finds that the honour of being the son of the freedom fighter is of no practical value. He thinks that his father’s sacrifice has left behind only suffering for his survivors. In search of a job he undergoes so many humiliating experiences. Neither his father’s sacrifice nor his educational intelligence does come to rescue him. He finds himself in a shocked position:

What is more shattering than the breakdown of a faith? … What hurts in the collapse of the faith that they destroy. You believe there is justice in the world. You go about the world for fifty years, this belief sitting in your heart. Then something happens and you go seeking justice. And justice isn’t there. You assume your wife is faithful, your children love you, your boss fair, or that God exists. And then some day proof comes along that nothing is so. This is what hurts (23).
Ratan comes to Delhi and for a job he gave interviews at many places but remains jobless. The depressing experiences of job-hunting, of being “examined, interviewed, interrogated, and rejected” (29) have a crushing effect on him. He fails to get help from his father’s friend. Alone dishearted, deflated, the world appears to him “as a bundle of mirrors, tempting and somehow hold together, but on the brink always of falling apart” (17). Because of less money he lives at Sarai in a room with other five workers. Always he is haunted by his failure, he says that “What got me down, wiped the laughter off my face, so to speak, was that they worked, earned, spent and I had no job. I, who was the most educated of them all, would soon be on the streets, a failure, an incompetent, penniless fool” (25). To get respect from his room-mates, he takes recourse to lying as he says that “A new dimension to my life. I had become, at the age of twenty one, a hypocrite and a liar; in short, a sham … I had become a master faker. And all this had happened within a period of six weeks” (27).

With the help of a stenographer he gets a job of temporary clerk in the department of war purchases. As he gets job he never looks back or the people who helped him. He changes totally and becomes the part of ‘bourgeois filth’. As he gets job, slowly he settles in his life. Now the only aim of his life is to make his career “educated, intelligent, cultured, and it was my right that I should rise in life to levels higher than others aspired for” (32). The Officer, the Superintendent or a high Priest of an exclusive cult becomes a key to his career. He works hard in the office “harder than almost everybody in the
department except the Superintendent himself” (35). He serves as an obedient and faithful employee in the office and soon he wins the Superintendent’s confidence. His journey of an official clerk begins and further corruption of his soul is only a matter of time, he contemplates:

I embarked upon the solemn and relentless pursuit of a career. Bourgeois filth, careers and … There have been moments in my life when I saw nothing but filth around me. At such times my head would explode with violent, rebellious thoughts. But when I would always calm down, and ask myself: what can be done? Here I am. And here is the filth, What can I do? How can I get away? … One had to live. And, to live, one had to make a living.

And how was, living to be made except through career (39).

Ratan becomes practical, materialistic since he compromises and marries the niece of the Superintendent. He comes to known the reality that the world runs on the basis of deals and “if men forgot how to make deals the world would come to a stop … it is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that lies at the heart of the universe: it is DEALS” (48).

He becomes a modern man in the full sense of the term-cunning, deceptive, selfish and easy going. Even his marriage is a deal. Merely the night journey in the train becomes painful for him. He suffers from humiliation and can’t sleep for many nights, he describes it as “… nights of humiliation, nights when you are ashamed of something, ashamed of yourself, when the darkness is full of insults, pointing fingers and making laughter” (47).
He behaves like a Sartrean hero. As his marriage was a deal, within few days after India became a republic he becomes an officer. He starts corruption and rises his standard living. He becomes rich but is away from the satisfaction. He purchases a flat, a car, a luxurious thing like a refrigerartor and has twenty thousand rupees bank balance. As he rises higher he becomes more unscrupulous, fraudulent and hypocritical, he says that “The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied and the more I was determined to ‘enjoy’ life. And all the time I thought of death” (85).

On the one hand Ratan is corrupted but at the same time he has strong feelings about his motherland. He remembers the ideals of his father, the miserable condition of his motherland. He meditates as who should be held responsible for the debacle of war, the ill–equipped military or the incompetence of the politicians. He comes to the conclusion that the root of the downfall was not the military, nor the politician, nor the weather but the “INDIAN CHARACTER” (55). With the hope of bringing about a change in the existing setup he writes an essay on “Crisis of Character” in which he hits at the corruption in the society and describes Indian people as “a glorious monument in ruin, a monument of which even the foundations had caught canker” (56). Although he gains all the materialistic gains he is always dissatisfied, Das says that “He has been gradually sinking into the abyss of darkness, of corruption , exploitation and bourgeois filth” (41) and he has satisfaction of swimming and not sinking.
Ratan comes across Himmat Singh, the Sikh, an agent of the corrupt system. He offers Ratan a high bribe and tempts him into a big bargain for the supply of defective war materials to the Army. Firstly he thinks a lot of about it as it is related to the security of country. He observes and realizes that everywhere there is corruption such as baby food, antibiotics, etc. people get money through any area of corruption and resolves corrupting he himself. As Himmat Singh tempts him he approves the defective war material which results into the death of his close friend, the Brigadier. It is only after it he realizes his mistake, he says that “What happened to me during that time? This ? This is what I ask myself and again without getting an answer” (59) and “how could men who had burnt away twenty years of their lives for a cause do things that would so surely make a wreck of it? How could they possibly change so suddenly?” (60). He blames the prevailing atmosphere for his degradation. He finds himself trapped in the corrupt system where “men were weighed in money power” (62). He thinks that his freedom has no meaning and it seems to be nothing but a word “Freedom but a word, my friend? Freedom of men, of nations. No more than a word … We thought we were free. What we had in fact, was a new slavery with new masters’” (60-61). He wonders how he can be his own master when he has been smothered by a system. He justifies his action vehemently:

If I had taken a bribe I belonged rather to the rule than the exception. Peons were frequently taking bribes. So were government officials and traffic policemen and railway
conductors. A bribe could get you a bed in a hospital, a place to burn you’re dead. Doctors had a fee to give false certificates, magistrates for false judgements. For a sum of money politician changed sides for a larger sum they declared wars. Bribery was accepted by factory inspectors, bank agents and college professors; by nurses, priests and chartered accountants; by all those who acted in the public interest. Men took bribes to facilitate the seduction of their wives; women for seduction of other women. All this I knew and had known for twenty years (108-109).

Ratan becomes the part of the corrupt, materialistic society. The principles, ideals and aim of his life is totally changed which he had in his youth period. He calls himself nobody without any identity:

I was nobody. A NOBODY. Deep down I was convinced that I had lost significance; as an official; as a citizen; as a man. How could then my actions have significance? What significance was there in steering a boat that had no destination or watering a tree that would never bear fruit (70).

This realization in him is momentary. He becomes victim of wine and women when he goes to Bombay for the agreement related to defective war materials. He enjoys with prostitutes, later on he realizes that “I was, in fact, at the peak of dung heap that I had been climbing all my life” (82).
In his Bombay visit he comes to known that even members of parliament are not worried all about the fate of war, he says that “Nobody lost a war these days, the M.P. said. There were always compromises. To be candid, he whispered. Who cared for the wilderness that we were quarreling over” (82). He is surprised by Himmat Singh’s destructive role, he says that “Himmit Singh conducts his operations for neither money nor power but in order to destroy” (17) and derives sadistic pleasure in destroying “Everything from top to bottom, from one end of the continent to the other” (77). Before signing the deal Ratan is fearful about its exposure before the people “that people would come to know’’ but Himmit Singh tells him that only fools like him believe there is a law book laid down by God which they must follow, he says that “There was no such book, Rathor –what existed-was not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for society” (72). Further he tells Ratan that “This country had two kinds of people the rulers and the ruled’’ (80). The rulers were a fraud phoney people who know only how to make speeches, be cruel and feather their nests, and who made a mess of things without knowing how to clean it up. The ruled were brainless. This all disturbs Ratan and it leaves him with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with his life. His existence is tormented by the question “Why did I take the bribe” (69). Because he feels that he has accepted the bribe when he really doesn’t need money. Here he resembles Albert Camus’ Jean–Baptiste–Clamence who says that “yet I was unhappy because about this as if I had violated the code of honour” (92).
Ratan’s experience in Bombay at the party, at Brothel and his conversation with Himmat Singh corrupts him very much and he reaches a point of no return. He is in a pitiable “restless, depressed, uncomfortable condition” (66). He says that “Many things disturbed me but where I had expected, new achievements, new standards, there were no standards at all” (63). His father who sacrificed for the sake of country, people, who was a true patriot, a nationalist while Ratan, his son who becomes the part of the corrupt society who is doing dealing even with the security of nation, he is anti-nationalist:

I was no fornicator. I was the son of a revolutionary born to lead revolution. If not lead them, at last, to be part of them. I came from a race of men who had, over thousand years, battled for honour. I was expected to make sacrifices if required, give up my life for a noble cause. In all this I has obviously failed. The failure could perhaps be overcooked. But I was at least required to be good, sensible, uphold decency, preserve a sense of shame. At the least I was expected to think of my wife and my marriageable daughter. In short, I was expected to behave (85).

Ratan is in the dilemma, sometimes he is moral, good, patriot and sometimes immoral, evil, and anti-nationalist. He observes slouch in his spine, as his body bends one side. He looses his physical brickness and feels used up. He compares himself with his father, the Superintendent and the Brigadier once who were his inspirations:
For some reason this disfigurement of posture disturbed me. The best men in my life – my father, the Superintendent, the Brigadier had possessed a physical brickness that had envied and emulated. Not without success. I too, at one time, had been complimented on my demeanour and here I was slouching and awning every five minutes of a crisp winter morning. It was rarely that I had seen those men yawn except when they were ready to go to sleep or something (63-64).

Sometimes he is interrospecting, he feels self-betrayed. He feels about himself “the status of those leaves of autumn that are blown here and there, at the mercy of wind” (69). His frail and fragile existence is shaken, sometimes burns and he asks himself “What else can I tell you that would explain my act, why I took the bribe?” (69). He feels betrayed, guilty and his conscience meets the existential heroes of Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and William Golding as R. J. Das points out:

In the sense that the act of treachery inflicts an irreparable injury upon the moral nature of man, and that a guilty Ratan lives inescapably in the presence of his conscience. He too realises, as Razumov does in Joseph Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*, that all a man can betray is his conscience (143).

According to William Barret “Ratan becomes a typical modern man and Joshi has made him at once everyman and nobody” (5). In the utter confusion he feels fed up with the life of hypocritical, deceptive and corrupt materialistic
world. He becomes isolated and estranged from society, he says that “How all those years, I have been alone, so horribly alone in my anger, in my failures, carrying them in secret, like a thief, close to my heart, until their blazes have turned upon me and turned me to ashes. Believe me, I have seen it happen. I have seen my soul turn to ashes” (71).

This is the proof of his moral degradation and isolation. One evening when he sits by the side of his wife inside the temple before the God’s statue, he feels unnerved and speaks utterly disturbed which indicates his dissatisfaction in the life, he describes it as “That evening, I sat with my wife at the temple before the God, the God of courage and renunciation, that evening as I sat vowing and watering at the mouth before this great God I was already beyond his pale” (69).

Both Ratan and his wife are fed up in their life, Ratan comments that “But why blame my wife? It is true her discontent got on my nerves, rather unnerved me. It created for me a perpetual disturbance, the nagging feeling that our lives had been robbed of an existential substance …”(69).

Ratan is fully aware of loss of an existential substance of life, like other existential heroes he cries out in utter despair “What had I done? What was the measure for doing things or not doing them? What were the dividing lines between success and failure, loyalty and betrayal, love and hate?” (69).

The Indo-China War is lost and the Brigadier who returns from the battlefront, suffers from the nervous breakdown. Ratan meets him and finds that he is terribly shocked and emaciated “The man whom I always looked up
to and who had been the nicest to was a panic, sacred out of his wits” (90). The Brigadier is admitted in an emergency ward. He was very close and childhood friend of Ratan who saved his life from the attack of hooligans in his early life. It is the irony of the fate that Ratan himself becomes responsible for the Brigadier’s plight and death. The situation reminds one of Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* where Joe Keller’s supply of the defective gas cylinders lead to the death of his own son, Larry. Ratan expresses his horrifiedness at Brigadier’s misfortune:

> I watched him with a sense of doom. And watching him I remembered the autumn evenings on an athlet field and in the growing dusk the cry of the nightingales… It was the second time in my life that I had felt the pain of another as my own, the first being the time when my father was shot (100).

Further he says that “standing there by the glass window I felt as though it was not the Brigadier but I who was rocking through some dark dungeons of the world” (100). Ratan is realized of his mistakes for the worldly pleasures for which he betrayed his motherland, father, people, morality, conscience and a true friend.

He is very much shocked and shaken by Brigadier’s tragic death, so, he resolves to revenge upon Himmat Singh. He learns that in that deal the secretary and the minister like persons are involved so, he alone isn’t responsible. He is merely a tool in the hands of highups. Himmat Singh makes a shocking and candid observation of Ratan as he says Ratan “You are bogus,
Ratan Rathor, he drawled in a voice that had began to go out again. Bogus from top to bottom. Your work, Your religion, Your friendship, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing he said, but poses, a bundle of shams” (131).

Himmat Singh also tells him that the callous and corrupt society has made his mother a whore and his sister a vagrant, and that he has been driven to sell his soul to the Devil. When the Police Superintendent calls him and asks him about the defective war materials, he very shrewdly proves that he is unknown about it all. He answers like a great hypocrite and a true patriot. He is put into the police custody and he is filled with amazement at the sorry state of affairs:

I watched his disappearing back in a daze of disbelief. Was it a dream, a nightmare, hallucination caused by some poisonous drug? Or, was I not Ratan Rathor, an official of the Government of India but someone born out of criminal parents dragged else, someone out of the slums of the old city? If I was not Ratan Rathor, what was I? Was I a thief? A scoundrel? Was I the murderer, they said I was? (106).

In the police custody Ratan’s mind is full of conflict, he thinks of the effect when the reality will be exposed before people. He can not decide whether he should confess or deny the allegations. He thinks of the ‘morality’, ‘goodness’, ‘humanity’, ‘maryada’, ‘dharma’ and their value in life but lastly he makes up his mind not to confess because the authorities have no proof he says that “I thought with satisfaction of a recent fraud executed by the scion of
one of the country’s secrets for a mistress” (112). He blames himself for the Brigadier’s misfortune; his conscience pricks him all the time. The Police Superintendent calls him the next day for confession. On that night he couldn’t slept thinking about his responsibility to the situation. Again the result is same, he resolves not to confess although he is aware of his sins, he says:

For twenty years I lived in this city and for twenty years, it seemed to me, there had been nothing but darkness. And I tried to find home in the darkness. I had stamped about, lured by carrots regulated by sticks, running here and there without knowing what I sought. Below me, lost in the darkness lay the defeated city. And I thought: the city is defeated, finished. Forget about it. You might have contributed to its downfall. But what had happened. What good is it now to whimper, to confess? (116).

Confrontation with death offers the heroes of many contemporary novels and opportunity of getting at an honest and even positive estimate of life. Meursault in *The Outsider* came to realize the absurdity of his life and of the universe only after his dramatic confrontation with death. Clemence in *The Fall* heard the insidious laughter behind him when he fled in panic from the drowning girl. It led him to recognize the deep-seated hypocrisy of his existence and to take the role of the judge-penitent. Sindi’s self-examination began after his encounter with death of Babu and June. Ratan realized that “something had gone seriously wrong with (his) life” (122) after Brigadier’s death. The sight of the shattered skull of the Brigadier at the morgue struck him
“as the vision of the vast pit at the bottom of which (his) life crawled. Like a worm” (124). The Brigadier’s death served as a catalyst that shocked Ratan out of his moral inertia and initiated the process of the inner transformation in him. That event of Brigadier’s death puts him on the search for meaning. He was jerked out of his self-complacency, pseudo-security and illusions and was confronted with the responsibility of his gruesome crime. He could not communicate his agony even to his wife and to his daughter for the fear that they would not understand him. So, “the silence remained. The panic remained. And I remained alone” (125). A gloomy sense of painful and boundless isolation swelled up in him and he felt, like Raskolnikov, that he had cut himself off from everything and everybody else. Ratan’s extreme helplessness, his ineffable agony and solitude are also reminiscent of those of the Ancient Mariner:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,

Alone on a wide wide sea!

And never a saint took pity on

my soul in agony (Coleridge 232).

This is the anguish of a man when he finds himself alone and robbed of all familiar ties and is faced with the emptiness and darkness of his guilt tormented soul. Ratan goes through terrible days and nights devoid of peace, sleep and consolation, he tells that “No occurance, no conversation, no visit of either friend or foe, no sleep, no respite from the hands that pulled me steadily down towards those caverns where, I felt certain, the Brigadier, had gone” (125).
The pangs of conscience had thus begun to rack him and his grief-crazed soul suffered inconsolably. The process of his search for meaning is already started. Ratan’s visit to temple is a part of his search. He goes there to seek moral courage and peace of mind. He is very much surprised when he finds the corruption in the temple as he meets the Priest who is ready to grease his palm and will give some bribe to save his corrupt, imprisoned son. Arun Joshi tells us that even the holy places and the representatives are corrupt, every part of the Indian society is corrupted by the selfish people, he looks back and finds “The grey evening stretched back twenty years until it seemed to me that there had never been sunshine, that for two decades I had lived only in smog: confused, exploited, deceiving, and how deceived. Deceived beyond imagination” (133).

Now the difference between good man and successful man is clear to him. Ratan is pursued by the dead Brigadier everywhere and every time and he alienates himself from the degenerated, corrupt society. His conscience always pricks him, his soul is tortured as he says:

Twenty years and nothing gained. An empty life time. What had I learned? Pushing flies? Manoeuvring? At forty five all that I know was Manoeuvre. A trickstar, that was what I had let life make of me. Did I know the meaning of honour, friendship? Did I ever know it? Would I ever know it again? (133).

This is the meaning of his life, a summary of his life. Ratan remembers the ideas and goals when he had come to Delhi twenty years earlier he says that
“Twenty years earlier I had come to this city, just as you come now; to learn, to work, and in the process to make a mark. I had come full of hope, ambitions, goodwill; and all that was left was a pile of dung” (133).

Ratan expresses his existentialist wisdom as he says:

No one seemed to be sure. Whether what was right was practicable. That was where the rob lay. In the practicability of things. That was where I saw the best of them buckle. Because very often the best didn’t have the dazzling or the greed of charlantants. Thus, the charlantants won. And when they saw the charlantants winning the best become even less sure of themselves. And at times they turned charlantants (61).

Ratan is totally disillusioned he interprets life in terms of algebra as:

Life more than ever, reminds me of those, complex sums in algebra that we do in high school, sums involving twenty equations, all directed as discovering the missing ‘x’ with which they are in some way related. But they are also related among themselves, holding each other up, at times destroying each other and in the process, the mysterious x. And, at times, they are strongly set up so that the mysterious x is never found, or they are short by one or two and there can be no question of finding x, try as you might (49).

According to Thakur Guruprasad such a realization is “the apex of existential wisdom” (162). In the absence of any demarcation between right and wrong,
success and failure, loyalty and betrayal, love and hate, Ratan Rathor finds himself “reduced to the status of those leaves of autumn that are blown here and there, at the mercy of the wind. Why be surprised if one of them falls into the sewer” (69). Ratan suffers from an agonized soul which keeps him tormenting. When Ratan goes to console the bereaved widow of the Brigadier, she hands him back the ‘charm’ he gave his friend on the eve of departure before battlefield. Hearing that it was the Brigadier’s expressed wish that it should be returned to him, Ratan is strangely moved and shocked. Mathur and Rai points out that “He is caught in the dark labyrinth of life and is unable to follow the light that is within him” (148).

Ratan Rathor is a typical protagonist of Arun Joshi in so far as his most sincere effort, however belated, was to be in right relation with his own inner sense of ‘dharma’. He considers himself responsible for the death of his friend, Brigadier, for the death of so many soldiers and the defeat of India in the Indo-China war, he confesses to Himmat Singh as:

That is a terrible sensation – the realization that one’s life has been a total waste, a great mistake; without purpose, without results. There are many sorrows in the world, but there is nothing in the three worlds to match the sorrow of a wasted life. All else, thoughts of revenge, of pleasure, of pain pale before it, are made pointless (135).

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

Arun Joshi appears very close to Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and William Golding in the sense that act of treachery inflicts an irreparable injury upon the moral nature of man, and that a guilty Ratan lives inescapably in the presence of his conscience. He too realizes as Razumov does in conrad’s *Under Western Eyes* that all man can betray is his conscience (45).

Ratan is always tormented and thinks of making society free from corruption. Now he realizes that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and therefore each act should be done with a sense of responsibility. With a deep urge to undergo penance and affirmation in his life he undergoes the sternest apprenticeship of its own quality in the world.

Like Mahatma Gandhi Arun Joshi believes that the key to man’s transformation lies in man himself. He believes that the salvation of the people depends upon themselves, upon their capacity for suffering and sacrifice. It is Joshi’s conviction, too, that the human heart contains the mystery of renewal. The dialectic of good in Ratan was set in motion through agony and intense spiritual torture. Thus, Ratan’s strange apprenticeship began:

Each morning, before I go to work, I come here. I sit on the steps of the temple and while they pray I wipe the shoes of the congregation … Then I beg forgiveness of a large host: my
father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victims of my cleverness those whom I could helped and did not (142).

Though it was late, he didn’t give up the struggle. With a renewed faith in life and in him, Ratan says that “I know it is late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair (143).

As Ratan finds the corruption in the temple, he is fed up of it and won’t like to enter into the temple, he repents by standing on the temple steps, he says:

I never enter the temple. I am not concerned with what goes on in there. I stand at the doorstep and fold my hands, my hands smelling of leather and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Then I beg forgiveness of a large host. My father, my mother, the Brigadier, … whom I harmed. Be Decent. Be of use (143).

According to Ratan even memory of shoes acts as a check on his lapsing into his old ways, he says that “And during the day whenever I find myself getting to be clever, lazy, vain, indifferent, I put up my hands to my face and there is the smell of a hundred feet that must at the moment be toiling somewhere and I am put in my place” (143). Here, wiping of shoes has the symbolic overtones of the Christian concept of Christ’s washing the feet of his disciples on monday and thursday. Only humility could help him to get rid of
all the delusions that make his life ‘an endless torrent of fear’. He is initiated into the lesson of humility and feels that the only sustaining basis for action is to be use to others “without vanity and without expectations and also without cleverness” (143). He tells the young listener to consider him as an apprentice and thinks that there is nothing wrong to have a second start.

As he is on search, he has many questions in his mind. His inquisitiveness for puzzling questions of life is partly satisfied when Himmat Singh diagnose the malady—the crookedness of the Indian society and its cure as:

But if it was God’s darkness, he asked, what was the cure? What was the cure of a crooked world? None, perhaps, Revolution, perhaps. Or perhaps—perhaps—he seemed to hesitate for a long time—perhaps God himself. God alone perhaps could remove his darkness. But where was God, he cried out again, suddenly excited, his voice ringing with despair. What was God? And where? (140).

By standing on the doorsteps of the Krishna temple Ratan hopes that the young generation should turn the gloomy future of India. Although the future of the country looks gloomy, yet the young “might yet hold back the tide” (144). Arun Joshi pins his hopes on the new generation and ends the novel with a positive note of affirmation. There is hope as long as young men are willing to learn and ready to sacrifice, as they have done many a time before. Ratan
exhorts the young to rise to the occasion and make a second start. It is never too late. And always late is better than never.

The dilemma about God adds another existential aspect to Ratan’s existence. The words of Himmat Singh goad to view his existence from a new angle. He further tells Ratan that “My soul was killed, you put your to pawn. But souls that were pawned could perhaps be retrieved” (140). Ratan decides to retrieve his pawned soul by putting himself to use in spiritual humility and resignation to the will of God. Ratan comes to understand that a combination of humanism and religion can be the saving grace of mankind stepped in corruption. According to R.J. Das here Joshi presents a contrast to other existential writers like Graham Greene, he writes that “For Joshi the experience of the Absurd constitutes the starting point of his movement towards affirmation and for Greene it is decent into abysmal pessimism” (45).

In Ratan’s case confession serves threefold purpose. First, the need for confession is an attribute of criminal consciousness. Secondly, it offers him the possibility of cleansing his soul of the layers of filth piled upon it during his successful career of a Government official. There can’t be a cleansing of the soul without any clean confession. Finally, through his confession he seeks to achieve a perception which is however, deeply personal.

In his confession Ratan tells that “There is nothing in the world as sad as the end of hope. Not even death” (25). The important aspect of Ratan’s character, is his confession, his candour and sincerity. Srinath rightly observes:
The Apprentice shows a remarkable self-awareness in ruthlessly exposing his over-subtleties, fads, self-deceptions, preoccupations, ego and boredom of the dark phase of his life. It is this along with his present strength to laugh at his meaningless past that gives a kind of complexity to the character of Ratan (129).

Ratan would call out his destiny on the basis of his karma, or action, which was bound to bear fruits here on this earth, in this very life. He would delve into his soul in search of light and truth that is the meaning of life. It was in the dark labyrinth of his soul that Ratan would ultimately find the answers to the overwhelming questions posed by his existence.

Thus, through the present novel Joshi suggests a different remedy to life’s problems which is within the reach of common man. Ratan realizes that life may well be zero but it isn’t necessarily purposeless. He reaches his affirmation in his apprenticeship, wiping the shoes of the congregation in front of the Krishna temple. He remembers what his father had told him “whatever you, do touches someone somewhere” (143). However petrified and frozen our society may be, there is hope that if man is disposed to learn, as Ratan Rathor does, he may learn in no time and the novel ends with a dawn which is symbolic of man’s regeneration, he says that “But no matter. A dawn after all, is a dawn” (144). The Apprentice commends the value of humility and self-purification. In this sense it is a study of the loss and the retrieval of one’s soul. The cause of alienation and emptiness of Ratan is neither the rootlessness of Sindi Oberoi nor the unusual urge of Billy Biswas.
Thus, Ratan undergoes expiation and believes that purification is to be obtained not by any ritual, or dogma but by making amends and this vision is the vision of Bhakti in *The Bhagavadgita*. His wiping the shoes of the devotees cleanses his soul. Redemption in Ratan takes place and he believes in the existence of God who only can help him. Arun Joshi suggests:

A stage comes in your evolution when you can do without rules, but you must have a tremendous self-control... There is a long journey before you can reach that stage so that only few people are inclined to do that. There will be a time again when people will turn towards the divine and want to become instrument of God, rather than living for themselves (93).

*The Bhagavadgita* recommends humility as the sense of utter humility. In the presence of the ideal, he feels that he is nothing. God loves meekness, the utter prostration of the self. According to V.Gopal Reddy “Ratan’s existential decision to recover the lost self through an act of penitence reveals the need to realize and prize one’s integrity” (229).

Ratan Rathor takes bribe when he doesn’t need it. It illustrates exquisitely the course of an existential career. And his next choice, in order to redeem himself the work of shoe shining or wiping the shoes at the temple foot all unknown to his wife is also his own decision, as Sartre would put it, in his choice lies his freedom, and as Joshi wants to see there lies his redemption as perhaps Sindi’s lies in working in Mr.Khemka’s office after the empire vanished. The most horrendous perhaps in the battleground between human
good and evil masquerading as pursuit of career that is his inner life, is the battle that rages inside himself after he discovered that he was responsible for his friend Brigadier’s wretched plight and suicide, and worse still, that he could have saved the Brigadier by confessing his crime. It left him cracking up fear of failure is his tragic flaw, and he knows that “There is no fear like the fear of madness. All other fears are common to men and can, if you have the luck, be shared. Those who descend into madness descend alone” (129).

This is the apex of the existential wisdom he comes by and the defence mechanism he discovers against it is the confessional. The shoeshine business is his confessional unto himself. Yet another existential aspect of Ratan’s labyrinthine life is the dilemma he shares with Sindi on the one hand and with Som and his father on the other. It is the dilemma about the God.

*The Apprentice* shows a similarity to Albert Camus’ *The Fall* in respect of its exposure of Ratan’s hypocrisy. Like Baptiste-Clemance he looks into his own deception, snobbery and corruption in a mocking way. In retrospect, he looks at his own fall and finds that he had willingly allowed himself to deteriorate and had no reason to find fault with the world. Earlier he had been a victim of self-deception, in which he holds himself innocent and blames others for his misdoings. Like Clemence, he discovers that there can be no playing truant with life and there is no salvation outside it and he takes the responsibility on his own to affirm the meaning of life.

The ‘religion of service,’ humility and the newly awakened sense of responsibility towards one and all are Ratan’s, and Joshi’s too, answer to the
dilemma of existence in an aimless, purposeless and unprincipled society. Salvation from the contemporary confusion of values and suffering can be found not in self-defeating isolation or unprincipled pursuit of material comfort and worldly success but in communal faith, commitment and resoluteness of the humble. Joshi’s attitude of responsible existence in *The Apprentice*, thus, contains a social dimension. The novel depicts, in a sense, modern man’s crisis of faith in ordered universe and in God.

The title *The Apprentice* implies that for leading a purposeful life in this world one has to undergo some sort of training, to broadly acquaint oneself with its parameters. An experienced fresher ignorant of the ways of the world is destined to feel frustrated and tired of his existence. The title conveys the very message of the work. Ratan says:

> What am I apprenticed to? If I only exactly knew! or if I could put into words what I do know. But life runs on approximations and if an approximation will do, you could say that I am learning to be of use. I know it is late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart not yield, at any cost, to despair (143).

The realization that, ‘life runs on approximations’ that dawns upon the protagonist is a veritable treasure of human experience. His confession that “I am learning to be of use’ (143) sums up the essence of human life. Humility is a first step towards devotion or Bhakti and by deciding to take up this unpleasant job at the temple doorstep Ratan initiates himself in the process of redemption through devotion.
Arun Joshi’s fourth and the prestigious Sahitya Akadami Award winner novel *The Last Labyrinth* published in 1981 is considered as “a new landmark in the tradition of existentialism in Indian literature” (Gupta 5). It represents an extension of the theme of Joshi’s earlier novels *The Foreigner, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and *The Apprentice*. According to H.M. Prasad it is an “articulation of the contemporary phase of dilemma of modern man who is essentially turbulent, groping through the labyrinth of life, existence and reality” (85).

It deals with both the inner and the outer world of a westernized Indian aristocrat who has lost his spiritual roots. Yet he is never at ease despite his inherited affluence and the concept of materialism acquired from the West. It deals with an obsessive and highly sensitive individual, Som Bhaskar, and his grappling with the feeling of emptiness and void at the core of his being, his search for meaning in life and finally his unconscious efforts to come to terms with himself and the world amidst discontent and sever social resistance.

The issues explored in the novel are life, love, God and death which are the basic human preoccupations. Som, like Arun Joshi’s other westernized existentialist protagonists belongs to the upper-crust of society. The present novel holds up a mirror to a certain section of the modern Indian society with its cynicism, hedonism, loss of faith, confusion of values and anxieties. Som is unable to come to terms with life because of his failure to come to terms with himself. His western rationalism is skeptical of Indian spiritual thoughts and religious beliefs. He is lost to the end in introspective solitude and waits for his
encounter with the last labyrinth, death, which alone can, perhaps, resolve his doubts and contradictions.

The present novel is unparalleled in the treatment of a subtle Indian theme based on the importance of Hindu religious philosophy as advocated in the holy scriptures like *The Gita* and *The Upanishads*. It is about a man confronted by the four paths of life: dharma (duty), aartha (wealth), kama (desire) and moksha (liberation). It is based on the karma yoga, the attainment of liberty by the soul by abandoning Kama (desire), krodh (anger), lobha (greed), moha (allurement), madha (lust) and aishwarya (pride), the six enemies of man. It is deeply influenced by the Hindu philosophy, theosophy and existentialism. It deals with the journey of man from the temporal to the immutable centre. Arun Joshi while centering round the two conflicting hungers: the hunger of the body and the hunger of the spirit suggests the path of human salvation.

According to Guru Prasad Thakur in the present novel the word labyrinth comes to acquire “a thematic reasonance a metaphoric inclusiveness” (162). According to Jorge Luis Borges in general “a labyrinth is a structure compounded to confuse men; its architecture, rich in symmetric, is subordinated to the end” (125). The word ‘labyrinth’ has been used in its literal and metaphoric senses by various writers like Emile Bronte, E.M. Forster before Arun Joshi. It can be traced back to the story of Minotaur in the Greek mythology told by Ovid and Apollodorus. Doedalus, a great architect, was ordered by Minaus, the ruler of Crete, to construct a place of confinement for
Minotaur, a monster, half-bull and half-man. Doedalus built labyrinth which was famous throughout the world for its intricate structure. Once inside, one would go endlessly along its winding paths without ever finding the exit. To this intricate labyrinth Minos, who had invoked and seized Athens, forced the helpless Athenians to send a tribute of seven maidens and seven young men every nine years. A terrible fate awaited these helpless creatures. In whatever direction they ran they would be running straight to the monster that devoured them. There was no possible way of escape. Finally, however, Thesus, the great Athenian hero and the son of king Aegeus, succeeded in killing the monster and coming out of the labyrinth with the help of Ariadne, Minos’ daughter. She had fallen in love with Thesus and in exchange of his promise get out of the labyrinth.

In Franz Kafka’s novels we find the words ‘labyrinth’ and ‘maze’ as signifiers of the inexplicable mystery of life and the world. In Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine magic realist, the word ‘labyrinth’ is used to denote the enigmas of life and the universe as well as of the human mind. To Borges the world is a book and the book is a world, and both are labyrinthine and enclose enigmas designed to be understood and participated by man. The ‘chakravyuha’ of The Mahabharata also gives the idea of a labyrinth purposely constructed to mislead an enemy so that he fails to come out of it. Abhimanyu lost his life trying to penetrate this treacherous maze.

The location of Lal-Haveli and the structure of the building itself are a pointer to the existence of wheels within wheels. The puzzling nature of Lal-
Haveli and more so of its labyrinths correspondingly imply the mystifying nature of its inhabitants. The mystery of Lal-Haveli is revealed by the conversation between Aftab Rai and Som Bhaskar as Aftab says:

My ancestors baffled their enemies this way. There are rooms within rooms. Corridors that only bring you back to where you started… There are rooms where you could lock a man up and he would never be found. No one would hear his cry. “And what is in The Last Labyrinth?” … “Why, death of course” I looked at him puzzled. I meant the labyrinth of this house”. “Yes…Yes…” he said vaguely and went ahead (37).

It is built like the bhulbhulaiyan of Lucknow, and it is labyrinth like. Som’s ancestors erected the structure of Lal-Haveli on the idea of bhulbhulaiyan of Lucknow. It was built either with no plan or with the most meticulous plan. Gargi’s room too becomes “a labyrinth” (97). Describing the boat journey to Gargi’s cottage on the other bank of the Ganga, Som writes:

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

Sujata Mathai writes that “Arun Joshi sees lives as labyrinths hopeless mazes where you may get irretrievably lost or discover the shining secrets of the core of life” (34). At the symbolical level, the Lal -Heveli stands for the
The maze of life and ‘the last labyrinth’ of the title is death itself which is more mysterious than existence itself.

The word ‘the last labyrinth’ can be operative on many levels. On the surface level, it alludes to be last labyrinths in Lal-Haveli at Benaras, the kind one finds in ‘bhubhulaiyan’ at Lucknow. In the present novel Lal-Haveli becomes an important place where all the important activities in the novel take place. It is “a labyrinth within the labyrinth of lanes that stretch westwards from the ghats of Benaras” (29). In essence, it is a microcosm of the labyrinth of life and death. It is reminiscent of Daedalus’ labyrinth which also contained at this end.

The novel has a great moral purpose that is edification of the human soul by following the path of dharma or satya. Only dharma can guide a man through the meandering paths of life. The emphasis falls on a harmonious balance of three paths of a life karma, jnana and bhakti. It is as much about man’s action, knowledge and devotion as it is about the liberation of human soul attained by living in a sin-tainted world of kama, krodha, lobha, moha, madha and aishwarya but free from perilous influences of them all.

Som Bhaskar, the protagonist differs from Arun Joshi’s other protagonists as others move from alienation to community but, according to Arun Joshi he himself, this hardly happens in the case of the present novel, as he himself confirms that “Alienation of any characters in my novels that I have written so for ultimately leads them back to community. I realized that in my latest novel The Last Labyrinth for the first time this doesn’t happen” (90).
The novel continues in the tradition of the first person singular. The narrator hero is Som Bhaskar, a wealthy young industrialist, who belongs to the upper strata of society. He relates the events of his life in the flashback. Like his predecessors Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas and Ratan Rathor he is in the search for meaning in life. The novel probes into the turbulent inner world of Som Bhaskar. He yearns for peace in life in which he finds himself concerned, leads him through untold suffering. Arun Joshi presents a graphic picture of his pathetic plight. He had taken the good western education which makes him supporter of the rational, industrial, technological world. His traditional Indian roots give him a sense of isolation when he is required to follow Western culture in the materialistic world of Bombay.

It is a study of the modern man’s mental tumult. It treats man’s split state of mind, its causes and consequences. It portrays a modern Hamlet through Som whose problem is to become materialistic or spiritualistic. Som is a young and educated business tycoon. The novel depicts the hero’s quest for both the physical and mental fulfillments in life. However his desire for materialistic comforts as well as mental harmony takes him nowhere. The novel explores the crannies of Som, his Jungian and Sartrean struggle for an authentic mode of life. His mind is a labyrinth and so are his life, ambition, reality and existence. He is a typical Westernized, affluent bourgeoisie who has been relentlessly searching for meaning and in this process he discovers only a haunting emptiness and void. In the futile pursuit of realizing his ambition he gets mentally shattered and physically exhausted with vague dreams and
insomnia, he maintains that “I looked at myself in the mirror: lean, crow-footed, greying. I could not then, see fedupness endless depths of it… I woke up in the middle of the night, depressed the taste of tranquillier in my mouth” (21).

He is relentlessly driven by an indefinite hunger, hunger for money, hunger for fame, hunger of the body and a hunger for some spiritual sublimity. He lives in a make believe world of his own, alienated from the society about him. It deals with the theme of the spiritual agony, it explores the turbulent inner world of an aristocratic young industrialist, who becomes a millionaire at the age of thirty. He married Geeta, a woman of his choice, who has born him two children. Born of the rich parents, educated at the world’s finest universities, spending a quarter of a million on his education, he has resources enough for the joy of physical living. But quite strangely he is constantly driven by undefined hungers.

In the very beginning of the novel Som realizes that he has “become a nuisance” (10), and has been fooling around “like a clown performing before a looking glass” (10). A roaring hollowness inside the soul and “boredom and the fedupness” (21) torments him constantly. At the age of thirty five he become “a worn-out weary man incapable of spontaneous feeling” (14). Always he seems to be just “like a hare chased by unseen hounds” (12). He expresses his dissatisfaction as “wondering, curious, analyzing, correlating getting nowhere” (80). Once he tells Anuradha that “I’ll tell you what is wrong I’m dislocated. My mind is out of focus. There is something setting right in front of me and I
cannot see it” (107). Always Som is existentially alone and all his business wizardly is essentially purposeless. Som stumbles over wine and women again and again to survive each next existential crisis, as he expresses his womanizing in his confessional talking with his future wife in his seaside villa:

Watching her I was moved and I took her in my arms. Just like that without notice. I had done that to other women, taken them by surprise, not the surprise of a Casanova because, as one of the deployment and pressure of my limbs communicated that, but the pleasant, asexual surprise hug of a fellow survivor after a crash landing (69-70).

Som is lonely, an existential man. Like Ratan Rathor, he too, generalizes on the loneliness of all men, in his earlier quoted narrative comment on Azizun’s song, which is used as the theme song for his paper and may well be the theme song of the fiction of Arun Joshi, the industrialist who writes to know and, in an existentialist tone, claims to be a stranger to his own writing. The base of his problem is that constantly he is chased by undefined hunger, always he is haunted by mysterious voices, he says that “Audible only to my ear, a grey cry threshold the night air. I want. I want. Through the light of my days and the blackness of my nights and the disquiet of those sleepless hours beside my wife, within reach of the tranquillizers, I had sung the same strident song. I want. I want. I want” (11).

Throughout his life he sung this song and has been troubled. His trouble is multiplied not only because of “the terrible loneliness” (23) of his heart but
also because of his awareness of the lack of meaning in his life. According to Dr. Birendra Pandey “He is torn by the inner contradictions and his consciousness wonders in the maze of opposite impulses. He suffers from the intense feeling of inadequacy of feeling of rootlessness and a feeling of rudderless boat being tossed on turbulent waves” (Daruwalla 7). Som is tormented by the great roaring hollowness inside his soul. He feels himself struck by thunder, bled totally of all energy, that is inside him “there was nothing but an empty roaring like the roar of the sea in a conch” (115). He thinks that “It is the voids of the empty spaces within and without” (47). The burning ghats of Benaras also communicate to him the sense of “Voids with a bang. Both within and without… Voids all” (48). In his search for meaning he discovers a haunting emptiness and void which makes him “mentally shattered, morally degenerated and physically exhausted with dreams and insomnia” (Reddy 223). His infictions plunges him into “a bottomless pit of despair, like a shipwrecked sailor sinking into the ocean” (144).

Som’s anguished soul has no cure in the medicines prescribed by a psychiatrist like Dr.Kashayap. Always he is torn between belief and disbelief. Even Gargi fails to convince of the existence of divinity and miracles. Gargi messages him by writing on pad as “There is no harm in believing that God exists” and he reminds Pascal’s teaching. Still Som persists. “It is easier to believe that He does not exist. It is more convenient that way” (213). R.S. Pathak writes that “All along his life Som Bhasker suffers from an inner crisis and is apparently at war with himself ” (Reddy 8).
Always he would like to possess of an object, a business enterprise and a woman named Anuradha. Always and everywhere he is dissatisfied, he remembers that “For many year now, I have had this awful feeling that I wanted something. But the sad thing was it didn’t make the slightest difference when I managed to get what I had wanted. My hunger was just as bad as ever... Later, it become more confused ... A world spinning all by itself” (89).

Som’s father was very intellectual, professionally a scientist interested in saving the problem of the First Cause. He spent over a quarter of a million on his son’s education in the prestigious American institutions. Som writes a paper on Pascal at Harvard. Also he is aware of the teachings of Krishna and sermons of the Buddha at Sarnath, cynically he thinks that “Money was dirt, whore. So were houses, cars, carpets” (11). He is a seeker after materialistic pleasures in his personal life. He is more dissatisfied with his existence when he runs more and more after the physical pleasures and cries that “It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me” (47). Som’s father was perturbed by the perennial questions of science and philosophy regarding the First Cause. His grandfather had been a contrast to his father. The former had been “a man about town, gourmet, fond of women and drink” (156). Som reminisces that “anything to do with God embarrased him” (156). But Som’s father was unlike his own father, as:

He knew things beyond anything grandfather could imagine. Was it 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? And where did I fit in? I was a womanizer all right and a boozer, but my womanizing and boozing had not settled anything. I had inherited the afflictions of both of them for what were they if not afflictions, afflictions that God let us into unbearable entanglements (156-157).

Som’s mother became victim of cancer when he was of only fifteen years old. She relied more upon Krishna than drugs for cure. Even his father did not live long after his settlement. He is neither a devout like his mother nor inquisitive like his father. The quest for the unknown labyrinths touches him in his associations with Anuradha and Gargi. He suffers from certain contradictions of his life and seeks someone to resolve them. He is in lookout for an escape and a safety valve. It is with this motif he comes in contact with Leela Sabnis and Anuradha in Benaras. Like Som himself Leela Sabnis too is well trained in philosophy and psychology, she had been a student of both Descartes and Freud. She was a polyglot who knew number of languages from the East and the West. She had M.A. and Ph.D.from Michigan and some other degree also from London yet to him she is “a muddled creature. As muddled as me. Muddled by her ancestor, by marriage, by divorce, by too many books” (77).

Som’s sorrow is unbearable as he says that “I had sorrows that didn’t let me breathe” (109). He is totally dissatisfied as he says that “If I believed in God I could pray, may be run a rosary through my fingers. But that’s out”
(10). Which expresses his disbelief in religion and God. Even he is envious of those who believe in God. His search for meaning is more clearly marked in the following remark as he himself maintains that “But I needed the trust who doesn’t? I needed it all the more because I did not trust myself, or my men, or my fate, or the ceaseless travel on the social wheel” (63). He is very anxious to know what he wants. The desire to know is a labyrinth “If only one knew what one wanted. Or, maybe, to know was what I wanted. To know. Just that. No more. No less. This, then, was a labyrinth, too, this going forward and backward and sideways of the mind” (53). To Som, in life “Nothing was straight forward. One was always running a hurdles race” (133). He rushes about in the search of happiness and meaningfulness “How happy I must be to have no problem in life” (98). But life is teeming with troubles and pains, which are all the more keenly felt by sensitive people. Always the question about life and death haunts him. Like his father he is vexed by the thought of death, he says that “There was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death” (15). He wants to know its secret.

Even psychiatrists failed in solving Som’s problem as it is spiritual one. He is in need of someone who inhabits both the worlds “What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined” (82). Anuradha, Aftab, Benars, Lal-Haveli and the people around him all prove to be “bores, frogs stuck in their ancient marshy wells”, and he decides to go abroad and “get the hell away from this land of obsessions” (113). Leela Sabnis, a psychologist, analyses his character as saying that “you
are much too high strung without reason. You are a neurotic. A compulsive fornicator” (80). According to her Som’s problems originate from his habit of “always playing games with the world” (80). She tells him that “you are lonely on the one hand. On the other, you have built a shell. That is the long and short of it” (80). His encounter with her fills in his erotic urges, but beyond this he doesn’t learn anything else. To fill in the voids of his personality. Som’s encounter with Anuradha becomes a kind of an obsession and has an abiding influence upon him. He is attracted by her magnetism as she is a symbol of an antic beauty. The demon of love so overpowers him that he visits Aftabs’s Lal-Haveli in Benaras. The haveli is built like a labyrinth which is the central symbol of life and death in the novel. Its structure is a maze within a maze in the maze like structure of city of Banaras.

Anuradha was born in a Biharsharif to an insane mother who earned her livelihood by singing for her customers. Once she was being taken away by one of her lovers who in the drunken state killed her by the broken whisky bottle. Her aunt brought up and educated her. She was known as Meera in her childhood. She suffered many humiliating experiences. In her childhood she was sexually abused; in the young age she was seduced by the producers in the film-world. Aftab Rai extricated her from the film-world and gave her an honorable place in Lal-Haveli. They aren’t married but are living like a husband and wife. She was proud of her status, she says that “It is better not to be anybody’s wife. You can’t marry everyone you love. So why marry anyone at all” (43). He is amazed to listen her as she says that “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 Krishna” (128). About the reasons of his dissatisfaction she explains that “you don’t know what you want. You don’t know what is wrong and you don’t know what you want” (106).

Som considers everything about Lal- Haveli to be enigmatic. To him not only Lal- Haveli but also the streets and the bank of the Ganga in Benaras and inhabitants of the maze like structure become labyrinthine. To him Anuradha is also mysterious. Once Aftab Rai introduces him to Gargi, who is the deaf and mute daughter of a Sufi Pir who communicates by writing on her pad. She is an ascetic woman of about forty years. Her father was a prince but later on he becomes a Sufi Pir. He used to live with Aftab’s father. He had supernormal powers and restored eyesight to Aftab which he doesn’t believe.

Everywhere and every time he is aware of the lackness of relevance in life which results into the terrible loneliness of his heart which troubles him. He finds the world meaningless. Later on he becomes more convinced that life is full of complications “a labyrinth within the labyrinth” (29), like the lanes of Benaras. He looks at life as “vanity of vanities” (32), which could be compared only to “Meaningless flights of stairs” (34) or “a fisherman’s net” (37). Because of some grim experiences he develops “a new loathing for the squalid world” (46). He compares his struggling self only to “ant threading thorough a maze, knocking about against one wall, then another” (53). To Know the secrets of life, he tries to probe into “that core of loneliness around which all of us are built” (54). He is fully convinced that all the problems can be solved if
one has knowledge. He mention that “If only one knew! If only miracles were
to take place, as of old, and one could suddenly, irrefutably, know, without
nagging, enervating doubts. I want. I want. If only one knew one wanted. Or,
maybe, to knew was what I wanted. To know. Just that no more. No less” (53).

He is totally disgusted with the people around him and he himself. He
states that “It is the voids of the world, more than its objects, that bother me.
The voids and the empty spaces, within and without” (47). On the Manikarnika
ghat in Benaras he finds “Voids with a bang. Both within and without … Voids
all” (48). To him the greatest dilemma of human life is its ultimate reality that
is death. He wants to know its secrets. Death is to windup all, what is the point
in running madly with outstretched arms in pursuit of “little pleasures or little
vedettas of life” (65). He tries more and more to know the meaning of life
but at every time he fails. To him the world remains “a mysterious world, as
pretentious and meaningless as the holy bulls of Benaras” (108). About his
interest, he says that “nothing had interested me more than the secrets of the
universe” (129). Again he says that “Why should man be equipped, burdened
with this strange… This strange sensibility, or urge or drive? Is it by chance?
Or, is there a meaning to it?” (130).

He is always haunted by the questions about life and death. He asks
Aftab what lies in the last labyrinth in the Lal-Haveli and Aftab answers it as
“why, death of course” (37). Som would like to know where one went after his
life:
Was this it, then? The terminus? The last of labyrinth? … Was it this that I had wanted all my life? Was this the answer to the relentless chat “I want. I want. I want.” Why was it so unsatisfying? Or, maybe, the labyrinth had not ended. Something else lay ahead, something more fundamental than a miracle (211).

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

Bhaskar’s crisis is not a crisis of emotion or ethics; it is a crisis of consciousness. The march of human evolution and the development of civilization down the ages have brought the modern man to a point of consciousness where he can neither believe nor refuse to believe… Bhaskar is continuity in his anguish of alienation in his existential problem… Bhaskar’s dilemma lies deep down in his own self and consciousness. It is not the outer world, the objective reality but the world within, the subjective reality which is essentially the fountain spring of despair and anxiety (Narsimhaiah 81).

His search for life’s secrets is his search for the meaning of life. But it becomes hopelessly complicated because of his yearning to have the best of both the worlds – the world of matter and of spirit. He suffers in life, speaking about the unfortunate situation he is trapped in, he observes:
But I was just not myself. That was where the rub lay… I had sorrows that didn’t let me breathe … Then, there was the greatest sorrow of them all… That no one even guessed. There was the sorrow of idleness… But there was always this bit of me, a large bit, somewhere between the head and the chest, just idling about like a stationary engine, getting involved with nothing. It made me feel as though I was one of the weirdest things to happen to anybody… Had it always been like that? Had I always been half asleep? Or, could it be that I once had put me to sleep I could, perhaps, get rid of it like, one get rid of a hangover… Everything was a hare. Time itself seemed wiped off like the spools of a Computer (109-110).

Som is always eager to know the meaning of life. He syas to Gargi “I want to know. Probably, I want to believe. But one can’t order belief, I must have evidence” (213). *The Last Labyrinth* centres on his conformation with the darkness of death and the void in the Lal-Haveli. He is endowed with a highly intellectual and scientific mind, which is constantly caught up in a maelstrom of idea, values, issues of philosophy and metaphysics and is troubled by it. Som like Abhimanyu in *The Mahabharta* who is not able to come out of the chakravyuva. Som loses himself in the chakravyuva of life and death, illusion and reality, doubt and faith. Som cannot find any satisfactory answer to his questions, doubts and inner voices. According to Narasimhaiah
Sanjay “He gets mentally shattered, morally degenerated and physically exhausted with derams and insomnia” (8).

Som is the battleground between the two hungers, hunger of the body and of the spirit. And in the fight his mind takes side of the body. Being overpowered by desire, he falls a victim to Kama and other vices such as lust, wrath, greed and pride. His excessive preoccupation with sex makes him a Miniature Casanova. The novel gives expression to the desire, and the path of moksha being illusive, for he himself is blind to it, either he hears or his unconscious self sings “I want. I want. I want”that appears and reappears in the novel again and again. And this hunger he fulfils with Anuradha, an antique looking woman, who is like “A monument; tall, handsome, ruined … Thirty, thirty-five from Bengal, from Sikkim, from the valleys of Nepal” (12). In his efforts to possess her wildly and madly, she becomes the centre of his life. According to Gargi Anuradha is Som’s shakti who can transform his hunger of body into the hunger of spirit. He finds his eternal renewal of his search for the last labyrinth, which he believes will get in the sexual communion. Ultimately the novel turns out to be the realization of the existence of God or the death of the body and liberation of the soul. In the whole process of this march of human soul from the darkness of maya, to renunciation.

Som is a fusion of two conflicting human faculties, instincts and reason. This blend of the two distinctly separate sides of human faculty corresponds with the basic thematic background of the present novel. His reasoning enables him to seek the evidence of the existence of God encircled by the world of
maya and voids. He becomes a sad man losing his head unable to guide himself in the direction of the right path that is dharma. Leela Sabnis rightly regards him as “A man so successful, so intelligent” and asks “Why should such a man be so confused?” (79). Again explaining his voids, their cause of effect, she says that “… May be what you want is a mystical identification, identification with a godhead, as almost Hindus want, sooner or later” (113). Like Billy Biswas who is searching for the worlds within worlds Som is searching for a labyrinth within labyrinth. Som’s faith is in the intuitive religion based on the fundamental instincts of man, which vent themselves upon an immediacy of fulfilment of a strong primitive desire. Lack of faith, however, does not do him any good. He is suffering from tension, unhappiness, disturbance, hysteria, tantrum, neurosis, and some strange dreams and insomnia while all others around him are happy even in suffering and in face of death. His mother was never saddened by the thought of death; rather she enjoyed life thinking that she would be saved and cured by the wooden image of Krishna. It is to be said that God realizes himself in the devotion of his worshippers. Likewise faith is essential to their realization of Him. It is faith that gives peace and happiness.

Som’s suffering, however, is an account of his fear of death, he says that “I was insecure… I was afraid of death. That made a little more sense. I was mortally afraid of death” (74). To his questions. “What is first cause”? “What is in the last labyrinth”? he gets the answer as “death”. He is, however a tortured soul, in which all forces of maya, are let loose, he hears voices, as he complains
that “All my life I have heard voices… I fear them a little too often and a little
too loud. Voices, mostly of the dead, relatives, authors, scoundrels, saints”(68).

Som’s dilemma, however, is not solved by his thirst for knowledge,
which pushed him over to melancholia. There is something wrong with the
means followed by Som to attain knowledge. Anuradha tells him that “You are
wrong even about yourself. You think you know a lot, when, in fact, you don’t”
(61). Som isn’t the type of person who would readily trust the world’s
mechanism. He doesn’t realize the value of genuine understanding and trust, as
he himself says:

But I needed the trust- who doesn’t? I needed it all the more
because I didn’t trust myself, or any men, or my fate, or the
ceaseless travel on the social wheel. Between the empty home
and the cultured offices… In this whore of a city what I needed
most was to be reassured that all was well” (63).

Som’s wife Geeta is a person who “trusts like birds fly, like fish swim”.
She is presented as a “sensible, brave” person “aware of certain fundamentals”
of life which have remained hidden from her husband. In her Som finds a trust
“If discontent is my trademark, trust is Geeta’s” (63). According to Som in this
mysterious world everything is haze and there is “a mystery into which
everything fitted” (161). His efforts are directed towards perceiving and
explaining this very mystery of the world. His struggle, however, is rendered
futile by his nagging, enervating doubts. He says that he doubted everything
and everybody and his fears increased. Everything pertaining to life appears to
him: “such stuff as dreams are made of”, he says that “I dreamt I was in a labyrinth” (82). His past life “had been like a dream” and he is “glad the dream was over” (83). Again he remarks that “I dreamt I was in a narrow alley at the end of which a shroud lay … The alley and the houses were deserted” (105).

Although Som is married and have two daughters, but he develops love affair with Anuradha. Frustrated by his failure to win Anuradha he goes to Europe with his wife Geeta hoping to overcome his obsession. However he is unable to forget Anuradha and his mounting passion for her makes him impotent, making Geeta miserable. He cuts short his holiday and rushes back to India. K.M. Chander points out that “Som was a kind of modern ‘trishanku’ belonging neither here nor there” (Roy 522).

His approach to life is somewhere close to the scientific methods of experimentation and validation. With this approach, however, he does not get anywhere near the secret of life. In his depression he even plans to visit temples every evening. He begins, ultimately, to nurture self-pity, and like one who has been completely vanquished by life, utters the terrible death wish “A peaceful death” (164) that is all he wants for he is mercilessly torn apart by his doubts. He is eaten up by his own “strange mad thoughts” (223) and incapable of paying adequate heed to the world and its normal demands.

He not only wants to possess Anuradha forever from Aftab Rai but also to acquire his shares in the plastics market. He seeks the blessings of Gargi in Benaras who encourages him by saying that “God will send you someone to help, someone who has known suffering” (118). Also she asks him to not to
quarrel with Anuradha because “She is your shakti” (121). In Bombay he suffers from a massive heart attack. After his mysterious recovery he wants to take revenge, he buys not only all the shares of Aftab but also employs private detectives to gather information regarding the shares transferred to Anuradha. He goes to a high mountain with his doctor friend, Kashyap, to visit the temple of Krishna to acquire Anuradha’s shares. The temple was situated at the top of the mountain. In his journey he is surprised to learn of an old man, who travelled nine hundred miles to die near a lake in the mountains believing that it will open the gate of heaven for him. Also he come to know about Gargi’s father who gave eyesight to Aftab. He is surprised to see Gargi at the temple. Dr. Kashyap reports him that how Anuradha goes to Gargi, requests her to save Som’s life when medical science had given up all hope for his survival after the heartattack, he reports:

She (Anuradha) begged you to save him. He laughed her away saying he was in good hands and what could you do that the doctors could not. You said you could not perform miracles. Anuradha persisted, wept, begged and threatened, she said to you she could not live without Som and she would eat poison if something happened to him. She said your father had given Aftab his eyesight so why could you not save Som’s life. She said she would not go home until you did something for him (205).

In the end Gargi agrees to do the miracle on the condition that Anuradha would give up him forever. This intrigues him, he tells Gargi frankly that “In
the absence of evidence I intend to challenge the whole thing: I want to take not only the shares but also Anuradha. It scares me but I have no choice (213). At this time Gargi advises him against it as “God doesn’t work in the simple manner. God doesn’t seek revenge” (213), “man’s vanity (Ahankar) brings him revenge enough” (214). Yet Som searches Anuradha in Lal-Haveli where Aftab advises him against it, he says:

You don’t understand. You work by logic. By your brain. You are proud of your education or what you consider education.

There is an understanding that only suffering and humiliation bring. Anuradha has that. Even I have bit of it. You are empty of that understanding (217).

Som takes help of police to search her but fails in it. Her disappearance is mysterious. Gargi had done the miracle of that saving Som’s life on the condition that she would never see him. At last the light of moksha dawns upon him as if the whole universe had come out of a void. Now he has to undergo a path of renunciation, which he begins skeptically because of his guilt. After her disappearance when he has a sense of nothing left, he prays for forgiveness as:

Anuradha, listen. Listen to me wherever you are. Is there a God where you are? Have you met him? Does He have a face? Does He speak? Does He hear? Does He understand the language that we speak? Anuradha, if there is God? 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… Plead for me, Anuradha. He will listen to you (222-23).

Like Ariadane in the Minos legend, Anuradha offers to help Som to come out of the intricate labyrinth and cure his deep-rooted malaise by love and divine faith. But caught in vicious circle of reason, he spurns her offer. In his unquenchable hunger, he makes love to Anuradha, he feels that “It was like making love to a corpse. She just wasn’t there” (127), “She was like the ocean; one could never reach the bottom of her” (132). Anuradha’s ultimate sacrifice for her lover, Som’s deliverance is reminiscent of that of Sarah Miles, the saint-sinner-adulteress in Graham Greene’s novel *The End of the Affair*. Sarah prayed 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 chance. Let him have his happiness. Do this and I will believe… I’ll give him up forever” (238). God answered this human prayer. Bendrix returned to life. And Sarah, instantly but without any explanation gave up him for ever.

Realization in Som took place, the light of dharma opens his eyes. He looks within himself and sees that he is a leper “Deep inside my heart I knew that I was a leper, that I needed a cure” (126). Thus, his faith in God is derived from Anuradha. His development from the darkness of the body to the awareness of spirit might have been possible through Indian philosophy. His anguish for physical pleasure gets slowly dissolved. To be happy and satisfied in the life one has to conquer desire, temptations, anger, lust greed and
pride. Som’s condition is wretched, he is agitated by the materialistic thoughts which makes him fall “into a bottomless pit of despair, like a shipwrecked sailor sinking into the ocean” (147). Being ignorant of the last goal of life ‘moksha’, he continues to suffer, gripped by a vague fear of everything.

True God or His existence is to be meditated upon and not to be argued with logic and analysis. Sant Tukarm says that men should waste not time in argument but throw themselves at God’s feet. Science only begins and ends with evidence. To disdain logic and science Anuradha says that “may be Krishna begins where Darwin left off ” (132). To get ‘moksha’ one must completely surrender or do submission to the will of God. Moksha is the result of long meditation, suppression of desires, lust, anger and greed. Gragi observes that “We are all the children trying to reach up to a crack in the door to peep into a room” (24). Arun Joshi suggests that the understanding born of suffering and humiliation seems to have been presented as a solution to life’s meaninglessness, and a mere rational approach to life’s problems will not do. The unwavering faith has been given as a sensible substitute for rationalism. To Som’s question Ponda replies that “It depends on their faith. Faith can move mountains” (198). Aftab tells Som about faith or belief in Him “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 your own faith when it suits you ” (166). Life’s problem being what they are, we have no option but to trust and pray if we want to lead a peaceful life. As
Kierkegaard says that “prayer doesn’t change God, but it changes him who prays” (180). This is what The Last Labyrinth also seems to suggest.

Finally instead of acting against Aftab Som acts against himself and taking his grandfather’s revolver he tries to commit suicide. His wife, Geeta prevents it from getting fired “Shaking me gently as though roaring a man from sleep” (229). He possesses a Pascalian passion to know, and perhaps to believe, but he cannot believe, and torn by doubts he walks tight-roped between life and death, illusion and reality, body and spirit. He suffers from an undefinable hunger, restlessness, a Hamlet like incertitude, an inherent sickness. According to Verma K.D. “His unbridled sensuality and individual pride lead him only to despair and meaninglessness in life, and hence to the impulsive decision to commit suicide” (209). Thus, The Last Labyrinth delineates the existential despair in the psyche of its neurotic protagonist, Som Bhaskar.

The long and tedious journey of Arun Joshi’s protagonists helps them to arrive at some meaning. Som differs from Sindi Oberoi, Ratan Rathor and Billy Biswas, after a long and tiring search he seems to have arrived at a state of uncertainty, he says that “Was this it, then? The terminus? The Last of the labyrinth? Was it this that I had wanted all my life? …Why was it so unsatisfying? or, maybe, the labyrinth hadn’t ended. Something else lay ahead, something more fundamental than a miracle” (211).

However despite all his disillusionment and uncertainties, Som’s only grip on life consists in his selfless, disinterested love for Anuradha. He pays no heed either to his business or to his lovely wife and growing children. The
departed Anuradha becomes the core of his existence, the meaning of his life. Like a true devotee now he is unconcerned with the world as such. He seems to have reached the end of his negotiations with the labyrinth of life and only the last labyrinth, that of earth, remains to be gone through and he looks forward to it courageously. Even his agnosticism seems to be lined with affirmation and with the possibility of a dawn of faith.

Som’s tortuous search for meaning of life is worked out in terms of parallels and opposites. Characters pitted against Som, highlights his inner confusion, vacillation and scepticism by their placidity of mind, composure and inherent faith in life and divinity. Som’s mother, Anuradha, Aftab, Gargi and Geeta are more or less his opposites while his father and Leela Sabnis are his parallels. His parallels suffer from confusion, doubts and uncertainties, which are the products of their rational minds and logical approach to life and reality. Arun Joshi by using this comparison highlights some problems of our time like scepticism, hedonism, loss of faith, anguish of intellectual doubt and spiritual homelessness that westernized Indians suffer from. The novel stresses the need to break out of the vicious circles of self-seeking pride and obstinate rationalism and to find meaning and purpose of life as well as faith in one’s cultural and religious tradition.

The novel suggests that the faith can be attained only after passing through a painful ordeal and overcoming the impasse of intellectual doubt through a knowledge of human suffering and through spiritual commitment. In the course of his journey through people like an old man, who has travelled
nine hundred miles to die near a lake in the mountains believing that it will open the gate of heaven for him, the little boy having divine power, a blind glacier that glides form one end of the lake to the other, the priest Som comes to realize that only faith can liberate one from the fear of death as it has done by the old man and earlier did by his own mother. With unflinching trust in God, one can travel fearlessly and resolutely to the other world.

The novel is a deep psychological exploration of a lost soul. Som is awfully aware of the baffling human predicament of being lost between the two worlds, of being unable to accept, or quite reject, the one that shakes his disposition with its inexplicable but tantalizing mystery. Infact, he is more than aware of it, he exemplifies it. It is for this reason that Som’s predicament appeals to the readers so powerfully as a paradigm of the life of modern man. At the root of his failure lies his intellectual pride, his excessive reliance on reason and his conviction that science and logic are enough to solve the problems of life. He fails to take, cognizance of the basic fact that trust in something other than reason is necessary for mere survival.

Som is deprived of the understanding as he never experienced suffering. Arun Joshi holds the view that it is very difficult to see one’s way through life without God, or at last concepts like right or wrong which looks upon suffering as a means of self-realization and liberation from the labyrinth of life. Arun Joshi’s protagonists like Sindi Oberoi, Ratan Rathor and Billy Biswas overcome their predicament and arrived at an affirmative knowledge of life and the world through immense suffering brings in its wake, is lost in introspective
solitude. He has lived a life of illusions, of indecision and negation. Som lacks the inner strength. He cannot take any decision, despite his realization that one has to find the way out of life’s impasse oneself. While other protagonists of Arun Joshi plunge into the dark, massy labyrinth of the soul for light and truth, Som relies on his reason and intellect and unfortunately, he is not guided by the light of his soul. In the present novel the great Upanishadic sage Yajanavalkya is remembered twicely. In *The Brihadarnayaka* Upanishada, King Janka asks that “And when the sun is set, Yajanavalkya, and the moon is set, and the fire has sank down and voice is silent, what, then, is the light of man?” (155-156). The answer that sage gives is the self indeed is his light. For with the self, indeed, as the light, one sits, moves about, does one’s work and returns. Som unfortunately does not let himself be guided by the light of his soul. In the very thick of miracles and intimations of the other world, he cannot sacrifice his reason. He like his father can not make up his mind. He doesn’t make any metaphysical leap or leap of faith.

*The Last Labyrinth* becomes, in the ultimate analysis a warning against a particular state of mind that, devoid of faith, death and God through western rationalism and discursive reasoning. The present novel suggests that egress from the intricate labyrinth of life can be found not in hedonism or rationalism and self imposed isolation from one’s cultural heritage but in love, sacrifice, communal faith, and adherence to one’s tradition that may provide one with a positive framework for individual self-definition and meaningful existence.
Arun Joshi’s fifth and the last novel, *The City and the River*, is a macrocosm of whatever Arun Joshi has written in his earlier novels. The existential questions put forth to Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor and Som Bhaskar asked this time to whole humanity symbolized by the city depicted in the novel and it has to choose between “allegiance to god” and “allegiance to man” (21).

Fairly it has vast canvas and deals with the relation of man with other men, with Nature and with God and the progress of mankind from creation to disintegration. It is a multi-dimensional and multi-layered novel with infinite possibilities of meanings and interpretations. Its thematic and modal complexity has given way to variety of approaches and interpretations. It has a large canvas and projects highly complex vision that incorporates issues and problems that did not find in Arun Joshi’s other novels. In it Arun Joshi takes into consideration the larger society, the bigger socio-historical and Godlessness loom large over the fictional locale. It assumes the epic dimensions and seems to be fictionally recording the war between two forces. The tension between the hostile, powerful and helpless, powerless and the resultant annihilation of peace and serenity and also of human dignity appear to be the main motto of Arun Joshi. Search for meaning seems to be the central theme of the it. Various themes are interlinked with spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of human existence. Paul Tillich pointout that “Man’s entanglement in the world of existence alienates him from his rightful place in the world of essence and ideal forces” (126-127). Man’s call is self – evident
of man’s alienation from God and his dispossessio of divine characteristics. All annihilation and destruction, exploitation and suppression, cruelties of tyrannies, spiritual decomposition and moral degeneration hover over the human world primarily because man is alienated from God, from the sustaining values of moral anchorage since these issues are universal in nature.

The novel projects the relations of man with other men, with nature and with God, the ordering of loyalties towards man and God, the nature of the struggle of good against evil for its very survival of the progress of mankind through spirals of time operating through creation of disintegration. Also it explores the very foundations of faith and right action. It treats the predicament of his characters in a hostile milieu. In it the individual crisis is replaced by the socio-political crisis of the city which represents the whole community. It is the symbol of the collective identity of the mass.

Arun Joshi through his novels very successfully reveals the subtleties and complexities of modern life. They have excelled in exemplifying the existential dilemma of the self in the society. Whenever human beings degenerate, anarchy and meaninglessness take them in their grip, which leads them nowhere. The great scholar Vachaspati Dwivedi comments as “If the city people do not mend their ways the process of Sristi and Pralaya after a period of time is to go on unless the whole world is purified. The canvas of The City and the River is very vast and encompasses with its range Time, God, man and Nature” (123).
The novel investigates the predicament of its characters in a hostile world. Along with the socio-political crisis of the city, the crisis of the individual also has been explored. The city described in it represents the whole humanity. R.S. Pathak comments that “the novel also throws significant sidelights in the relevance of meaning of life” (63). It amalgamates different modes and conventions. Just like Arun Joshi’s previous novels it has existentialist approach. About Arun Joshi’s novels Madhusudan Prasad very aptly points out that “they are singularised by certain existentialist problems of the resultant anger, agony, psychic quest and the like” (51). It is a story of endless repetition of periodic disintegration which can be prevented only if we achieve purity. R.S. Pathak mentions that “In The City and the River also Arun Joshi poses significant questions about identity, commitment and faith” (63). Also it throws significant limelight on the meaning of life. The city in it is a nowhere city and the river also is nameless, like the Nameless-One, Great Yogeshwara’s disciple. The existential problem here takes an supernatural proportions of the endless repetition and destruction of life on the planet wrought by nemises and retribution.

It is a parable, a commentary on the times, unfolding its story in the city by the river which is governed by the Grand Master, a benevolent patriarchal figure. It strikes an entirely different theme from Arun Joshi’s earlier novels. At one level, it is a parable of the times, at another level it deals with how men, in essence entirely free to choose, create by their choice the circumstances in which they live.
It moves on two levels simultaneously. At one level it is a political parable. It is a story of great struggle and terrible suffering, of idealism and exemplary spiritual courage shown by a beleaguered people who resist till death the authoritarian tendencies let loose by the effort of an ambitious and myopic ruler to become a king. It contains a severe indictment of the corruption and malpractices of political leaders, businessmen, police and army chiefs. In it there is a fusion of satire and philosophical discussion held together. At another level it is parable of human choice between allegiance to God and allegiance to man, or rather between religion and politics. It narrates how men, who are essentially free to choose, create by their conscious and free choice the environment they live in. Also it explores the relevance of god to man’s choices and whether, all said and done, ‘the world belongs to God and to none else.’ It is about the quest for spiritual commitment, for an inner spirit i.e. beyond any religion.

In it the karmic principle of *The Gita* is central. Its close study will evince that despite its satire on the present political situation, it transcends the realm of politics and explores some fundamental truths about human life with its spiritual destiny and that its ultimate world-view is not political but mystical or metaphysical.

It centers round the basic principles of Hindu philosophy which teaches an affirmative attitude to life. Here Arun Joshi presents a city which is in the jaws of destruction due to its people who seek the wrong way in life. Through the medium of city Joshi raises some cosmic and philosophical issues. City
people are in the conflict of choosing between “The allegiance to God” and “the allegiance to man” i.e. in between religion, politics or dharma and adharma. The city people face their doom as they choose a wrong path. The river flowing by the side of the city represents Nature and in the end it takes the shape of an ocean and sweeps away the city. The karma’s doctrine asserts that man’s final growth depends on him, his future is no predetermined. He is responsible agent who by the “integration of karma, Jnana and bhakti reaches his salvation” (Rao 150). If he chooses the opposite, he is bound to face his doom. In the end the city is destroyed because of the wrong path of its people which gives the age-old message of conviction and commitment.

In the present novel Arun Joshi uses various myths, legends and archetypes to suggest the value of an authentic life, faith and right action which are the barest necessities of the modern man. It depicts the horror and terror unleashed on society when a handful of individuals like the Grand Master become ambitious and selfish. The political scenario of the city is used as background which presents a contemporary problem with the metaphysical overview of creation and disintegration, sristi and pralaya dealt in Indian myths and legends.

The novel opens with a prologue and ends with epilogue. In between the two there are nine chapters narrating the rule of the Grand Master, his becoming king, the perpetuation of the reign of terror, people’s rebellion, the declaration of an Era of Ultimate Greatness, which is tantamount to the champing of the rule of Emergency, the repressive measures adopted by the
king and lastly, the destruction of the city with the great flood. Its narrative framework is mythical and its narrative pattern reveals that it is a story told by an old wise teacher, an agless seer, a Guru, Great Yogeshwara to his keen disciple preparing him to enter a new world after the complete destruction of an old city.

The prologue tells us about the last day of Nameless-One with the Great Yogeshwara. The Great Yogeshwara celebrates his pupil's thirtieth birthday by revealing him who he is? Moreover he points out to him the mystery of the world and how to “keep the grain and the chaff apart” (10). Also he teaches the secret of the body and that of spirit and how the spirit gained the control of the body. The Great Yogeshwara teaches him the way of the pilgrim, of the warrior and cautions him “about the ways of the tyrant and how to wait” (10). “Do you hear music, my son?” Asked the Great Yogeshwara. “Yes, father. And the dancing of a god” “that is good. I shall tell you now a tale who you are. Listen, this is how it goes” (11). The sound of the dance is the dance tandava of the Lord Shiva to bring ‘pralaya’ in this world when it becomes sinful and corrupt.

The Great Yogeshwara narrates the events of the last cycle to the Nameless-One. Now he is to be sent to another similar world as another hermit of the mountain to stop the “endless repetition” and “the periodic disintegration” (262) of the new city which is in the offing. The occasion is the beginning of a new era but the Great Yogeshwara wants to inform his pupil
about the past city and the cause of its end before the Nameless-One enters the new world.

There is no name assigned either to city or the river. The very opening paragraph of the novel depicts a photographic topography of the city:

The city over the years has grown. It has spread along the bank of the river and in the north it touches the very margins of the pyramids. As always, it is best seen from the river at sunrise. First comes the narrow brown band of the mud huts running from end to end, dotted with the green of many mangroves. Next offset a little to the right, in a higher ground, lies the neat rosy pink oval of the brick colonies and their special schools, clubs, shopping arcades. Beyond the brick colonies stand the famous Seven hills ranged in their picturesque formation. The hills vary in altitude and are now seat of the Grand Master’s government. On the tallest stands the palace, it is easily recognized by the delicacy of its dome which is said to be a marvel of modern architecture. The next tallest hill, for some reason, has been left vacant. On the remaining hills stand tall structures of steel and glass. From the river one cannot make out of the offices that these buildings house, but one is impressed none the less by their immaculate white that on moonlit nights gleams like a goddess’s limbs and stays wonderfully unstained during the rains when the mud huts
turn black end even the rose of the brick mansions is blotched (12).

In the city there are about seven hills and people live on them as per their social status and profession determining the geographical locations given to them on those hills. The Grand Master lives on the highest hill while the Ministers occupy other hills as per their social status. The middle class people live on a lower ground in pink brick buildings. The poor people like boatmen live in an area along the river bank which is the lowest in height. The Councillors of the Grand Master include the Minister of Trade, the Education Adviser, the Master of Rallies, The Astrologer, The Police Commissioner, the Commander of Army and General Starch who assist the Grand Master from time to time. The city is contemporary as it is divided in so many classes of social stratifications. Such type of class division gives birth to political trickery and the resultant conflict spoils the peace or the health of the city.

The Grand Master raises the question of allegiance which is the first step to consolidate his position. It results in the conflict between the Grand Master and the boatmen. The boatmen assert their allegiance to the river i.e. Nature because it is a question of the grave importance of them because “They consider themselves to be the children of the river, and to the river and river alone do they hold allegiance” (14). For the boatmen the river “is a symbol of divine mother, of God himself” (22). They consider themselves as the river’s children and they are ready to die for her. The novel has mythic perspective. It is added by the Grand master’s dream and the prophecy given at the very
opening of the novel suggesting that there is nothing final about the fate of the
city. The prophecy as:

Who knows, who can read the signs, the workings of immortal
time? A king I see upon a throne, in astronomers grove the
boatmen mourn, A thing of darkness growing dark, on city walls
the shadows mark. The river, I see, from a teacher rise. The
hermit, the parrot, the teacher die. Under a rain the waters burn,
to his kingdom at last the king returns (15).

The Grand master’s dream is related to this prophecy. The Astrologer
thinks the Grand Master’s dream suggests that the present Grand Master will be
the king of the city in future as he says that “Yet such dreams come out of the
depth of great truths and carry in them the truth of the times. If the times are
troubled, the troubles must be faced. It is no secret that the city has become an
unruly place, a plaything of asuras” (15).

The Grand Master adopts very ruthless measures to fulfil his dream. For
it with the help of the Court Astrologer he announces “The way of Three
Beautitudes” before the crowd. He begins his speech very impressively and
cunningly as “My children, God has sent the Grand Master to be your servant.
Looking after this city is a yajna form him, his life is the ahuti… A large
number of asuras have descended to disturb the yajna” (7).

In a very ambiguous way he explains the way of ‘Three Beautitudes’ is
as:
1) The Grand Master of the city is the father and the mother of the city. All citizens are his children equally. Let them offer their allegiance to the Grand Master as a child of his father.

2) The wealth of the city belongs to everyone. However, since there are too many of us, let it be resolved that hence forth there shall be one, and only one child to a mother and two to a home.

3) While prosperity and happiness await the city and all those who follow the triple way, for him who choose the opposite path and prefers to become a milestone round the city’s neck let him be received without mercy and be treated according to law of compassionate righteousness (17-18).

People remain confused as they couldnot understood its exact meaning. The headman, a woman who is the leader of the boatmen understands the inner meaning of the announcement. She presents an existential vision, she warns the Astrologer against befooling people:

You think that an ant is born on this earth without God’s will? If it is His will that there shouldbe only one child to a mother then surely it shall come to pass. There is no need for the Grand Master or you to pass the law … You said that the wealth of the city belongs to the people … Let the city’s wealth be put to use for the benefit of all (20).
The announcements like “the Era of Ultimate Greatness”, “Three Beautitudes” confused and feared the city people. As per the Grand Master’s order police crushed the rebellious people, they arrested the people and took to the prison house called Gold Mines. The Grand Master treats them beastially. The announcements and expressions are misleading expressions. The way of “Three Beautides” means an enforcement of a new code of conduct for the people “The Law of Compassionate Righteousness” means ruthless punishment to the innocent people”, “The Era of Ultimate Greatness” means the loss of individual freedom, a beastial slavery.

*The City and the River* has mythical pattern. Bhumiputra, Vasu, Dharma, Shailaja and Patanjali have the meaningful existence along with the boatmen. Professor, Bhumiputra’s guru has the modern name. These all are linked to the Great Hermit or the River who represents God and His divine power. Bhumiputra is the brain behind the conspiracy. Because of his disappearance the Grand Master orders and arrests Patanjali.

The Grand Master arranges the Festival of the River and tries to take an oath of allience from people through the medium of Astrologer, who asks people to take oath as:

In life and death, I shall not rest, until the last of the asuras, the last of the conspirators, the last of the traitors is eliminated from our city and laid in the grave. In this struggle, I shall hold my allegiance to the Grand Master and to no one else. If I break this covenant, entered this day of the festival of the Great River, may
Great River curse me, strike me dead, lay waste my seed for twenty generations, so help me God (100).

This oath taking results in the coronation of Grand Master’s son as the new king. The Grand Master by using the Astrologer and his ministry follows very callous path. He uses all the corrupt means or tools. The Astrologer tells the Headman “Do not bring the Great Yogeshwara into this, Headman. All I ask is that you also swear to the Grand Master… He and the Great River are one” (164).

Really the River is an embodiment of Time and the divine mother. The Boatmen owe their allegiance to the River while the king and his supporters because of their ambition, blindness couldnot find the reality. In this conflict between good and evil, who have faith and pursue the right action acquire the affirmation of life. The Great Hermit advises the blind Education Adviser by telling that a person can reach salvation in life only by the profound belief in God and by following the right path of living, he says that “God too is a king, Minister. I am sure you have heard of him … Here, there, in you, in me in the beggarly boatmen and his boat, in all that you see. The world belongs to God. Let him be the king of what is his” (70).

The conflict between the Grand Master and the boatmen is strengthened. The boatmen’s rebellion is meaningful, it is essential for the sacrifice that would purify the city. The Professor is weary and tired of the world. His search for Bhumiputra eventually leads him on to seek something deeper and more meaningful “his search had turned into a search for some lost bit of himself”
The Professor and Shailajas’s brother try to expose the moral nakedness of the Grand Master through Bhoma’s parable about the naked king. Dharma’s father sees a hole in his chest “It had started one morning when shaving before a mirror, he thought he saw a hole in his chest in reflection” (133). The Great Yogeshwara and the Nameless-One are “instruments… of the great God… Who is the master of the Universe” (263). They are sent with a mission to Purify the city of its “egoism, selfishness and stupidity” (263) which have taken the city in their grip.

Bhumiputra is Arun Joshi’s mouthpiece presenting his Hindu existential vision. He works as a teacher and guides the boatmen. In *The Bahvadgita* Lord Krishna talks about Jnanayoga and convinces Arjuna that the ultimate reality is soul and not the body. It preaches “wisemen donot grieve for the dead or for the living. A man who practises ‘Jnanayoga’ treats pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike” (Radhakrishnan 274).

Bhumiputra inspires the city folk, the boatmen in the similar manner “For if you are afraid to die then your soul is already dead the Great River, your mother, cannot help you even if she were back from the dungeons of the shadow-if you choose the death of your soul above the death of your body, then no one, man or God, can help you” (146). Again Bhumiputra inspires the boatmen about God and immorality of soul, he says that “The guns can kill your bodies, yes. Are you then afraid to die? … What is man, howsoever powerful! That he so fills you with dread, that you let him come between you
and your understanding… What do you choose, them this wisp of the mist or the Great river herself?” (146).

Bhumiputra inspires the boatmen but inwardly he himself is afraid, he says that “the thought of the Grand Master’s prison fills me with dread… I have done my bit and cannot go on” (155). The Great Hermit like the Lord Krishna encourages Bhumiputra to adopt the path of Dharma, satya and duty, he says that “The city, this world, all this is the manifestation of the one, and not the shadow of the Grand Master’s ego, as the Grand Master might imagine. And it is He, the one without a second, who secretly supports and guides all that you see, and what you do not see” (156).

According to the Great Yogeshwara the world runs as per the will of God. He explains the role of man in the plan of the universe, the value of the individual choice as “But almighty can manifest through men only what men allow him to manifest. This is why men and cities and nations must choose. There is the upward path that leads to freedom and there is a downward path that, for the moment at least, must least to perdition” (156).

According to J.P Sartre “For the secret of a man is not his Oedipus complex or his inferiority complex: it is the limit of his own liberty, his capacity for resisting fortune and death” (24). According to the Karmic principle man’s final growth rests with himself because his future is not pre-determined. About the importance and the individual choice, Sartre realised that man may “Choose to be nothing like a fable or may choose to reach above the stars” (Kaufman 47). The Upanishadas have insisted that a man can break
with the past through concerted will and action. Man’s growth rests on his way of living and thus he is not an insignificant unit of the universe but an active agent and it is only through his actions that he can achieve his personal salvation as well as collective salvation.

The Gold Mines symbolizes maya or sansara because of which men fails in achieving affirmation. In the Gold Mines the Headman is blinded and Professor dies by fasting. His death affects Grand Master very much and he orders the release of all the prisoners. At the same time he orders another order “no prisoner was to be set free unless he proves his innocence” (172). Because of Professor’s death and plight of the Headman, people go on strike. The Grand Master sends police to suppress the strike, the boatmen and the mud-people. The internal rivalry and conflict between the Education Advisor and the Minister of Trade results into the shock Brigades consisting teachers and students supports and joins the boatmen. This conflict is strengthened. The Headman advises the boatmen to fight for their dharma, duty, freedom as:

There are perhaps other ways to fight this, but we do not know of them. It is an ancient evil that has come out of the Seven Hills so, let the boatmen fight it in their ancient way. The beast we now face is deaf and blind and is set on single purpose, the Astrolooger’s oath. The king that was naked is naked still. Death, I say, is preferable to surrender to the king (208).
Again he tells Bhumiputra about the inevitability of death as “Death is certain for all and here is a reason to die. As I told you, the course of our struggle is set. Let it run” (208).

J. P. Sartre mentions that “Man as an individual should preserve the authenticity of his self without taking refuge in the bad faith” (265). It is a matter of individual choice for human beings to lead an authentic existence which Sartre regards as an absolute virtue in Existentialism. The Grand Master, the Ministers and the Councillors knowingly practise the ‘bad faith’ while the boatmen practise the ‘good faith’. Now a days due to different threats in the environment as well as by death man’s liberty is completely thwarted which is irrevocable certainly and only few individuals are brave enough to face them. According to Heidegger “The genuine existence is existence which dares to face death“ (266). In Heideggerian sense the boatmen boldly safeguard their authenticity. The Headman is the symbol of strength and commitment who understands the secret of human life which is liberty to choose.

The conflict become more and more darker, the Grand Master calls the members of the Supreme Council and after much deliberation over the caste and heredity factor in the choice of a king, they select the Grand Master as the king, the Minister of Trade as the new Grand Master.

Bhumiputra finds the meaning of life in action. His experience turns him from a timid and vacillating teacher into a dedicated man of action. Bhumiputra excites the demoralized boatmen by reminding them that they are the children of the sacred river, the symbol and the divine mother, that they should not sell
her soul to a man how so ever powerful he may be. Violence mars the hitherto non-violent movement:

The boatmen watched in amazement as with breathtaking swifiness, the Shock-brigades converted their strike into a general upspring. Within hours upspring spread from the Great River to the pyramids. Shops, schools, buses, telephone exchanges and railway station were systematically burnt (182).

Master Bhoma is worried about the violence and the meaningless destruction of properties. The Grand Master takes expeditious action. The wheel turns quickly as the Grand Master realizes his dream of becoming the city’s king in a secret meeting of his confidants held in an underground chamber of the pyramids at the dead of night. The king appoints the Minister for Trades as the new Grand Master of the city. The Grand Master crushes the boatmen, Master Bhoma, Dharma and their supporters; he uses even the modern weapons like helicopters, gun-boats, commandos and laser beams. The Great Hermit notices the change in the river while this suppression goes on as “the sky had once again become overcast, the clouds hung low and they were black. More clouds were rolling in from the horizon. Below him the river was raising” (227). Continuously the river was rising with a music of drums and engulfs each and everything in the city in its domain “To the melody now other notes are added, the sound of drums and instruments of which man has no knowledge” (251). The river becomes an identity of horror and awe to the Grand Masters and his supporters “All of a sudden the river was not a river
anymore … The inmates of the palace shuddred in horrors Grand Master’s new building broke in the middle and flood by floor, frame by frame, fell into the sea. and sent them flying into the sky” (257).

All of them perish in the river water and the Great Yogeshwara ends the story of the city and its king saying:

For seven days and seven nights it rained without a stop. On the eighth day the sun rose and from a clear sky stared down at a vast sea of water. The sea was calm and gave no hint of the agitation that had gone into its making of the Grand Master. This city nothing remained (160).

The Great Yogeshwara further tells the Nameless-One:

On the ruins of that city, as always happens a new city has risen. It is ruled by another Grand Master, which of course, neednot always happen. In the new city is another Professor, another Bhumiputra, another tribe of boatmen .There is another council and another set and councillors the men have other names but the forces they embody remain unchanged. And into all this when you go you will, perhaps, be known as another Hermit of the Mounatain. And it is possible you will have a disciple whose name will be Little Star (262).

Thus, *The City and the River* ends with an optimistic hope far affirmation. The Great Yohgeshwara sends his disciple to people to teach them the significance of prayer, faith and understanding:
The main is to prevent this endless repetition, this periodic disintegration. But to achieve that we need purity, purity? yes the city must purify itself if it is not to dissolve again, Purity itself of what? of egoism, selfishness, stupidity (263).

It suggests that there is the need of the self knowledge which brings understanding and unfolds the truth. Understanding brings commitment to pursue the righteous path with full vigour and faith in God. Though it is not easy but one must try as Great Yogeshwara says that “the question is not of success or failure; the question is of trying... The city must strive for purity. But purity can come only through sacrifice” (263). According the Great Hermit the God is “The highest truth”. He is the “Noblest thing each of us can imagine” (70). According to him, “belief in God restores peace to human soul” (76). According to him it is not success that we always get because “In any case we are only instruments of the Great God in the highest heaven who is the master of the universe ... His is the will, His is the force” (264).

The novel gives us the message that salvation from tyranny and oppression and egress from the endless cycle and becoming can thus be found in the purification the soul, sacrifice, complete effacement of ego, a total surrender to a higher consciousness beyond oneself. The Divine, the image of God, that dwells in the innermost being of all men, including the fallen and the criminal, expresses itself in the infinite capacity for self transcendence. Every man has the freedom to rise and fall and his future is in his own hands. He must exercise this freedom of choice consciously with full knowledge of its
consequences, since whatever he does affects not only himself but also others. Being a man he justifies his actions. He must overcome the psychic fetters like fear, cowardice and selfish desire which stand between him and his knowledge of truth. For the realization of truth- the truth of being and the truth of the times man must rise above himself, forget his petty concerns, and have the courage to translate his knowledge into action.

At the mythological and archetypal level the Great Yogeshwara is the ‘Purana Purusha’ and his pupil Nameless-One suggests Manu. The Great Yogeshwara resembles Lord Krishna and Nameless-One to Arjuna. The Great Yogeshwara like the Lord Krishna tells Nameless-One the gospel of the dharma revealing the mystery of the world. The Nameless-One is also a messiahnic figure like Christ. He is an illegal child but he is the chosen one. The Professor is like the Pitamah Bhishma in The Mahabharta. The river protects and destroyes the city like the mother. It is on her bosom that a child is born to Great Yogeshwara, the Hermit of the Mountain is the saviour of human race as his timely action saves the Nameless-One and who is sent to the new world.

The City and the River opens while music is heard by Nameless- One. Even at the end when the city is being submerged in the disastrous river this sound of music and drum is heard. This music and dancing suggest the dance of Lord Shiva indicating the universal stage of the novel. The devastation of the city is a sort of cleansing of an impure, selfish and faithless creation and it is replaced by another world full of hope and affirmation.
Herein Arun Joshi’s view is an ascetic. It is an affirmation of the Indian wisdom that has taken cognizance of the egocentric predicament of man and offered an acceptable solution. Arun Joshi has never offered any facile solutions of external systems to the human predicament and has stressed, instead, the need for the self-exploration and soul searching. Arun Joshi’s characters realize that the external systems are inadequate and that truth must ultimately be sought in an understanding to the self and its relation to the world. They seek a perception which is deeply personal, they are concerned about an internal system of order, and they search for the clue to the intricate labyrinth of life in the mysterious and unfathomable recesses of their souls. The search for meaning is difficult, involving suffering, loss, bereavement and sacrifice, but it is not impossible.

Just like other novels of Arun Joshi the present novel ends with an optimistic note. There is the spark of divinity in every one of us, may be a Grand Master or an ordinary boatman, and as such there is always room for hope. Even though human mind is inscrutable; there lurks within it a hope of redemption in the cycle of the endless repetition and the periodic disintegration. Human beings are free to choose their fate, and they choose for their fate, they choose for the better if they realise the relevance of man’s allegiance to God. Arun Joshi believes that it is the inside of our personality that governs the outside. The inside purity is essential to purge us of egoism, selfishness and stupidity. Humankind should concern itself with trying and not with the achievement.
Thus, Arun Joshi’s *The City and the River* explores the existential predicament of man. Here he goes one step further in suggesting man’s metaphysical reconciliation as an answer to all his worries, agonies, and alienation. He affirms the relevance of God to man in his life “Here, there, in you, in me, in that beggarly boatmen and his boat, in all you see and you do not see, the world belong to God” (70). Arun Joshi gives his final message, in the Great Yogeshwara’s words “His is the Will, His is the Force” (264) and so on unquestionable faith in God and surrender to Him is the only solution to our threatened existence. The novel proves that Arun Joshi has been deeply influenced by the Hindu existential vision. It continues the spiritual quest of his earlier novels through measured rhythms of myths, legends and archetypes. At the end of the novel we feel like completing quest and it is universal human quest for affirmation and meaning through negation of self. The question is not of individual success or failure but of the collective efforts for the common good.
Works Cited


