Arun Joshi's fiction explores the self and brings to a central focus the way in which the self tries to assess its involvement in and alienation from the family and society. For example, Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* says,

I worked in New York for a few more weeks, just enough to finish the project I had started. As it had happened after Babu's death the laboratory provided me a sanctuary where I could forget my conflicts, at least at the conscious level. But in the inner recesses of my mind the trial went on. Each day the judges met and examined the witnesses. My parents, my uncle, my lovers, Babu and June, their parents, and finally myself, one by one all were called by the invisible judges and asked to give their evidence. Under normal conditions this would have been painful but after the shock of June's death it came as a great therapeutic process. I felt as if some indefatigable surgeon was cleaning up my soul with the sharp edge of his scalpel.¹

The above passage may be taken as a thematic statement of Arun Joshi's fiction. The exploration of the self

is like "a great therapeutic process." By narrating his own experiences, Sindi Oberoi tells us how June, Babu, Mr.Khemka, and his daughter, Sheila, contribute in their own way to his understanding and awareness of the problems of the self. What is more, the passage seems to convey many levels of awareness through which he passes. Mr.Khemka's son, Babu, dies in a car accident in Boston. Sindi knows at the conscious level that he did not cause it. But an inexplicable fear haunts him. Perhaps it is this fear that converts the inner recesses of his mind into a court, where he is tried. But the oppressive nature of the trial takes a different shape, because of the shock created by the death of June, who is engaged Babu but continues her association with Sindi. The image of the "indefatigable surgeon," reminding us of Eliot's "wounded surgeon," concretizes the therapeutic process and disinfects the self. Sindi comes to India and meets Mr.Khemka, who offers him the post of a manager in his firm. Pursued by a tormenting sense of guilt and uncertainty, he feels, "I tried to understand why I was afraid. It was nothing physical. They couldn't put me in prison. I feared something much worse--the abominable hands groping and probing into my own soul.

\[2\text{T.S.} \text{Eliot, "East Coker," p. 147.}\]
ripping dry scars open and dipping into old wounds." The participles "groping," "probing," "ripping," and "dipping," in the preceding passage, suggest that evaluation of the self is a very painful process. Sindi seems to experience the reality of the process whenever he is alone. He tells us, "When I did go out I walked about the streets lost within myself unseeing and unheeding while the scalpel continued to move from chamber to chamber and tissue to tissue cutting out much that was rotting and disembowelling cells which had never been seen before. It was an awesome sight." The words "chamber," "tissue," and "cells" suggest that the self is a sort of labyrinth, and to subject the self to groping and probing is to pass through a maze. Narrating his love-affair with Kathy, the painful consequence of his separation from her, and the sadness caused by the separation, he says, "Even after several years, somewhere in the labyrinth of my consciousness the wound still bled. I felt sad and perhaps showed it" (emphasis added).

The foregoing citations from the text make it clear that the image of the labyrinth signifies the nature and the

3The Foreigner, p. 50.
4Ibid., p. 207.
5Ibid., p. 72.
function of the self. In this context, we may also note that the word "labyrinth" and its analogues occur quite frequently in Joshi's texts. The core of Joshi's fictional theme consists in viewing the self as a labyrinth, and any kind of assessment the self makes of itself is a therapeutic process. This thematic concern in relation to his other novels we shall elaborately discuss when we take up each novel for discussion. Suffice it to say here that The Foreigner, while developing the theme of the self/soul/labyrinth, brings to the fore the social framework within which the theme becomes meaningful.

Sindi Oteroi, the protagonist-narrator of The Foreigner, is not exactly a foreigner but a rootless person. The entire narrative emerges in a reminiscential form. Not only in this text, but in Joshi's fiction as a whole reminiscence is the major fictional device, and all his protagonists narrate their experiences, which are unified not in terms of sequence and logic but in terms of the experiencing consciousness. Social and human relations are meaningful within the scope and reach of the narrative personality. For example, Sindi tells us,

Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a
purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter? It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went. I hadn't felt like that when my uncle was living. It wasn't that I loved him very much or anything—as a matter of fact we rarely exchanged letters—but the thought that he moved about in that small house on the outskirts of Nairobi gave me a feeling of having an anchor. After his death the security was destroyed.6

The preceding citation is not remarkable for anything extraordinary but is significant enough to suggest an obvious case of rootlessness. Not only here, but in various other significant spots of the narrative, the word "foreign" and its substantive forms occur so as to make the term not just a label but an inclusive metaphor that governs and controls the narrative. Wherever he is, Sindi is a foreigner. The "foreignness" is not something external but something which the protagonist feels within. In other words, Sindi feels alienated, and the alienation is something that affects the self and makes it sad and subdued. From Kenya he moves to

6The Foreigner, p. 65.
England, and finally to Boston, where he meets Babu Rao Khemka. Hired by the Foreign Students Office to look after the new Indian students, Sindi shows, at least outwardly, his interest in India and the Indians who come to study in Boston. From the start, Babu appears to be erratic and indiscriminate in his views and statements. It is through Sindi that Babu comes into contact with June. When June tells him that Americans are not very congenial towards foreigners, Babu makes an irrelevant comment: "Indians are so underdeveloped as compared to them. Some times I wish I had been born in America. Not that I have anything against India but there is nothing to beat America." Sindi feels that it is the naivete with which Babu talks about his own feelings that makes him very confusing, if not embarrassing. But, curiously enough, June likes Babu precisely for his unselfconscious expression of his feelings. As their intimacy develops, June finds it difficult to disentangle herself from Babu, but at the same time she finds it hard to dissociate herself from Sindi. Whether Sindi really loves her need not trouble us. When she asks him to marry her, he tells her, "I am not the right kind of man for you. Some people are not really cut out for marriage." Sindi seems to have no pre-

7 The Foreigner, p. 97.
8 Ibid., p. 111.
conceived views about love. He broods over his relation­ship with Anna, Kathy, and June, and wonders whether he was in love with any one of them at any time. He tells June, "At least I have loved people as much as I love myself. It isn't much but that is not my fault. And then to be in love in your sense requires one to take things seriously, assume that there is a permanence about things. Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important." And hesitantly adds, "Good things and bad things appear to be the same in the long run of existence." The word "existence," in the preceding citation, may compel us to conclude that Sindi is talking like an existentialist. But this may be a misleading inference in the total context of Sindi's rootless and alienated self. The process of dis­covering the self, as has been noted earlier, is a sort of cleansing and disinfecting exercise, and has a diagnostic implication. In understanding Babu's self-created problems, such as his failure in the examination, his obsession that he thinks a lot about women, his commitment to his home, and his nostalgic ravings, Sindi tries to clarify the problematic of the self. As he says, "For the first time in many years

9The Foreigner, p. 113.
10Ibid., p. 114. 
I found myself thinking of the future. I wondered how it was going to turn out. Once it would have turned out in just one way, but now it was pregnant with alternatives. And the choices I made now would inevitably lead me to one of the alternatives. And there was no getting away from what I had chosen so far. After years of struggle I had almost achieved what I had always wanted to be; without desire. But I had bartered away the gains in an attempt to possess a woman. I had exchanged the steady tranquility of my being for the excruciating moments of extasy in a woman's body. The preceding confession of the protagonist stems from the fear that he may lose the company of June. It almost amounts to the self struggling to have and not to have attachment with the flux of life. This tantalizing situation is made more complicated by the sympathy June shows Babu. She writes to Sindi, "I have been seeing Babu frequently since you left. He seems to be in such low spirits most of the time that my heart aches for him. He is usually depressed because he is not doing very well in his studies. I go out with him every night because I think he needs me. I want to be of use to him. Perhaps, as you would say, it is all illusion: one can never be of use to any one. Perhaps I am

\[1\] The Foreigner, p. 124.
being selfish. All I know is that I find a strange peace when I am soothing him. I do so much want to be of help to someone, Sindi. Without that life would seem so empty. In this love-triangle, the victim appears to be June, whose system of preferences and priorities is meaningful within the framework of human values and human relations. Though she gets engaged to Babu, the wedding doesn't take place, because of Babu's obstinacy and his repeated failure in the university examinations. The situation becomes precarious when the university asks Babu to leave because he has repeatedly failed in the examinations. Moreover, June becomes pregnant, and Babu's taunting comments make her awfully unhappy. One day, in one of his irritable and nasty moods, he quarrels with June and leaves the flat, driving his car in a fit of rage and despair. He hits it to an overpass and dies in the accident. Sindi breaks the news of Babu's death to June and sends a message to his father in India. Some time later, June has an abortion and dies. The complications created by his affair with June and his relationship with Babu, and their deaths cause an agonizing introspection in Sindi. As he puts it,

... I was seized with the problem of once again putting together all that had happened to me and coming to grips with life. For twenty years I had moved whichever way life had led me. I had learnt much on the way. I had

12 The Foreigner, p. 125.
learnt to be detached from the world, but not from myself. That is when the fatal error was made that ultimately led to Babu's and then to June's death.¹³ (Emphasis added)

The above crucial passage sums up the thematic concerns of The Foreigner. As we have noted earlier, a foreigner is not one who stays in a country not his own but one who suffers from a sense of rootlessness. This feeling inevitably leads to self-alienation. If the self is detached from the world, it may gain a certain amount of objectivity and human perspective. But this is not enough if the self is to earn the awareness that would clarify the objectivity further and make it a mirror in which images of society could be reflected.

Sindi comes to India, and, as the manager of Khemka's firms, gets closer to Babu's sister, Sheila. It is by constantly talking to Sheila about Babu and by close-reading Babu's correspondence with his sister that Sindi discovers the disastrous consequences of alienating the self from its roots. It is Sheila's solemn and controlled sadness, now and then coming to the fore during their conversations, that makes Sindi gain the human perspective and understand the meaning of familial relationship in the Indian context. The following

¹³The Foreigner, p. 207.
dialogue amply demonstrates the insight that Sindi gains:

"Your father is a selfish old man and now the laws of existence are bringing his avarice home to him. Who are you or I to stand in the way? He must suffer if he wants to stop being a jackal and become humane."

Suddenly Sheila broke in, quietly but decisively.

"Would you stop calling him a jackal? You may be a wise man and I might admire you for your wisdom. But you forget how long it has taken you to get where you are. And all the destruction that you have caused in the process."

She was right and I had nothing to say.\textsuperscript{14}

Arun Joshi's protagonists are highly idiosyncratic characters. The usual fictional themes we find in the Indian novel in English-- for example, the theme of identity, the East-West encounter, the rural India--do not appear in Joshi. Brooding and retrospective, Joshi's protagonists struggle to overreach the self. Sindi Oberoi, a Kenya-born Indian of doubtful parentage, gets a doctoral degree in mechanical engineering from an American university, but his technical virtuosity recedes to the background when he gets bogged down in a mess of human relations. Billy (Bimal) Biswas, a US-trained

\textsuperscript{14}The Foreigner, pp. 230-231.
anthropologist, tries to harmonize his scholarly and human concerns but seems to fail to achieve an integration, largely because of the social hostility his actions create. The narrator of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, at the outset of the narrative, says,

Looking back ... it is not so much the final resolution of his life that interests me as I am intrigued by what preyed upon him during the course of it. If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and, having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its call. In brief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, no matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake. 

(Emphasis added)

The narrator seems to suggest that life's meaning doesn't lie in the world outside but within. The "glossy surfaces" are contrasted with the "dark mossy labyrinths of the soul." This unmistakably suggests that the soul/SELF

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has innumerable chambers whose significance can't be unravelled. If one tries to pursue this kind of enquiry "doggishly," society considers him strange and a useful case for a psychiatrist. The narrator meets Billy Biswas in New York, where he is studying anthropology. Though he comes from the upper stratum of Indian society, Billy lives in Harlem because he feels that white America is much too civilized for him. Even in America he keeps himself aloof and has only a few friends. He returns to India to teach anthropology in Delhi University. He marries Meena Chatterjee, but their familial relationship goes wrong from the beginning. Billy's preoccupations are such that he travels extensively and comes up with certain social facts that are not normal. For example, when Billy, his father, and the narrator discuss a murder, Billy says, "The point, however, is this: Is it possible for an ordinary person--a government clerk, let us say--to receive a message from a goddess and, having received one, to pass into another world, not for an hour or a day but for a week, a month, one whole year, at the end of which he may return to his normal state. If this happens, as it seems to have happened in this case, what is to be the attitude of the society, of the law, if you please?"16

16 The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 53.
Billy seems to be aware of the hostile attitude of society to any event which has supernatural and occult implications. When his father disapproves of his theory, Billy tells him, "It is only after it happens to oneself that one comes to believe. But, I am afraid, we have got side-tracked. I don't personally care whether the son got well because of the sacrifice or without it. All I am saying is that there are worlds at the periphery of this one, above it and below it, and around it, of which we know nothing until we are in them" (emphasis added).  

Billy's father conducts a trial in which a clerk is accused of sacrificing a boy to propitiate the goddess Kali in order that the clerk's young son, suffering from leukemia, should get well. We are not concerned with the problem of justice the case brings to the fore; we are interested in Billy's response. The passage just cited amply demonstrates Billy's interest in and fascination for unusual psychic phenomena. His investigations as an anthropologist confirm his intuitions as a man and explain why his wife is not happy with him.

One fine morning he disappears, and even the C.I.D investigations fail to trace his whereabouts. One of his

17 The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, pp. 54-55.
girl friends, Rima Kaul, who loved him passionately, meets the narrator two years after Billy's disappearance and requests that the strange case of Billy Biswas be reopened. The narrator, who is also the Collector of Jhansi District, thinks that it would be a futile exercise. But after reading the correspondence between Tuula and Billy sent for his perusal, he realizes that Billy's whereabouts may be traced. In one of his letters, Billy says, "It seems, my dear Tuula, that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I look at them, sitting at the dinner table, and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of Creation has brought us together." The self-questioning that is noticeable in the preceding passage is caused by Billy's dreams, in which he sees a strange woman who appears to be both familiar and unfamiliar. The narrator learns the significance of Billy's dreams and his psychic disturbance from Billy himself, when he visits a hamlet ravaged by a terrible drought. Billy appears in rags, and, after exchanging formal courtesies, narrates his experiences since his disappearance from Delhi:

In one of his expeditions to the rural areas in central India,

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 97.
when he was asleep, he had a dream so erotic that it upset him. Pressurized by the psychic trouble and an inexplicable erotic compulsion, he sat under a saal tree and gazed at Bilasia dancing. Bilasia was a rural girl, whose face Billy could identify as that of his dream-girl. Though he encountered a number of obstacles, he succeeded in marrying the village girl. Though he lives at the subsistence level, he is happy. He tells the narrator, "What kept us happy, I suppose, were the same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from the mahua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love-making, and, more than anything else, no ambition, none at all."  

The narrator doesn't want to reveal Billy's whereabouts to his family, but social compulsions make him reveal the secret. The Biswas family get into action in order to claim Billy not only for the family but for the civilized society. They don't succeed, because in pursuing Billy the guards are compelled to shoot him in sheer self-defence. As the narrator concludes,

The strange case of Billy Biswas had at last been disposed of. It had been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of dis-

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 148.
posing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers. Sitting there, watching the shades of evening settle slowly on the drab little town, it seemed to me that nothing but blind blundering vengeance, howsoever camouflaged, awaits all those who dare to step out of its stifling confines. It is a confrontation whose outcome is as certain as the end of solitary boats beating against a maelstrom.

It is unlikely that Billy was unaware of all this when that torrid afternoon he for the first time stepped out of the sanctuary of the great god of the primitive world who had until then guarded him as his own. It was also unlikely that he was not aware of the impossibility, in the world that he had abandoned, of saving men from themselves. It was this, more than anything else, that, for me, made his end so unbearably tragic.²⁰

The foregoing comments of the narrator suggest that Billy is aware of the hurdles he has to face when he leaves the primitive world to re-enter the world of civilization. We gather from the narrator's comments that Billy is more sensitive to certain experiences than to others. His affair with Rima Kaul and his marriage with a tribal girl obliquely suggest that he is prepared to take a great risk in order to

²⁰The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, pp. 240-241.
test the validity of some of his intuitions about life. After his re-entry into the civilized world, he tells the narrator,

'Any choice worth its name is drastic. It is another matter that we whittle it down or gloss over it until it ceases to be drastic. At the same time it ceases to be meaningful, either. Sometimes, I think the human mind is equipped with built-in apparatus for compromises. As soon as you are faced with a difficult choice this apparatus is switched on. It runs about here and there, brokering between various parts of man, rationalizing this, postponing that, until what is left is the conventional expedients of the age and hardly a choice. Deep down we are afraid that the price of making such choices is terrible, not realizing that the price of not making them is even more terrible.\(^{21}\)

The passage under review brings to a central focus the thematic complex of Joshi's fiction. The self/soul/labyrinth is placed at the crossroads where the conscious and the unconscious impulses meet. This, we can say, is a crisis which involves the self in personal and metaphysical dilemmas of existence. In Billy's opinion, the built-in

\(^{21}\)The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 190.
apparatus for compromises with which the human mind is equipped inclines towards conventional expedients of the age, thereby suggesting the self's impotence to choose what is right. Billy calls this corruption, and adds, "What could be more terrible than corruption."\(^{22}\) The Apprentice elaborates the theme of corruption of the self in a society which is itself corrupt. Himmat Singh tells Ratan Rathor, "My soul was killed, you put yours to pawn. But souls that were pawned could perhaps be retrieved... Maybe souls are like muscles, Ratan Rathor. Maybe to develop them one has first to put them to use."\(^{23}\) The word "muscles" calls to mind the passage in The Foreigner in which Sindi confesses that "When I did go out I walked about the streets lost within myself unseeing and unheeding while the scalpel continued to move from chamber to chamber and tissue to tissue cutting out much that was rotting and disemboweling cells which had never been seen before. It was an awesome sight."\(^{24}\) The process of retrieving souls is an "awesome" process, and Joshi makes use of "labyrinth" and its analogues to graph it.

\(^{22}\) The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 190.

\(^{23}\) Arun Joshi, The Apprentice (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1974), p. 146. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

\(^{24}\) The Foreigner, p. 207.
The Apprentice is a fictional experiment, in the sense that it is a confessional novel which employs psycho-narration. Ratan Rathor narrates the way in which he became a victim of corruption in a metropolitan society during the war between India and China. His audience is a student, who just listens; the narrator himself puts the questions and expresses the doubts that may arise in the listener's mind. The narrative runs like a monologue of Browning, in which there is an audience whose participation is just passive.

The son of a freedom fighter who laid down his life for the sake of a cause, Ratan Rathor comes to Delhi during the later stages of the Second War in search of a job. Through the good offices of a stenographer he is appointed a temporary clerk in a department for war purchases. His first boss, the Superintendent, noticing his docility and implicit obedience, recommends him for confirmation. After his confirmation, Rathor becomes a careerist. He shamelessly pursues advancement in his career and agrees to marry the Superintendent's niece. Though all his colleagues call him a whore, he turns a deaf ear to their sarcastic comments and concentrates on getting ahead of others in pursuit of his ambition. As an officer in the military stores department, he clears spurious
war material after taking a bribe from Himmat Singh, a notorious character. He has a friend, the Brigadier, who absconds from the front when the Indian army is suffering reversal and humiliation at the hands of the Chinese. After the cease-fire, the military authorities suspect that a shady deal was responsible for sending useless war material to the front. Not only has it caused loss of life and disaster, but it also humiliates the country. Ratan Rathor is very much aware of this. The intelligence branch of the army suspects Ratan Rathor and authorizes an S.P. to interrogate him in a prison cell. But Himmat Singh, using his influence, gets Rathor released from police custody. In the meanwhile another serious situation develops. The military authorities institute a court-martial to try Rathor's friend, the Brigadier, for deserting the army. The S.P. once again contacts Rathor and tells him that if he confesses his guilt, it may help the Brigadier escape court martial. When he makes a decision to confess, Rathor learns that the Brigadier has killed himself. Immediately Rathor goes to Himmat Singh in order to wreak vengeance, but Himmat Singh tells him that the Secretary has double-crossed him. He takes him to the Secretary but by then Rathor's determination to wreak vengeance on his betrayers loses its hold on him.
The above summary of the novel demonstrates the kind of society in which Rathor lives and pursues his ambition. The narrative is punctuated with words like "sham," "bogus," "whore," "humiliation," "fake," and other similar words. Rathor's father calls career-making "bourgeois filth." The word "filth" occurs too often to go unnoticed. For example, Himmat Singh "was born in filth and in filth he had grown." There is a close correspondence between the pursuit of career-making we notice in Ratan Rathor and in Himmat Singh. Starting his career as a shoe-shine boy, Himmat Singh becomes a pimp, a petty thief, a waiter, and finally involves himself in a minor black market racket. As the narrator puts it, "With the success of his rackets he was now face to face with the men who had had his foot broken, who had, perhaps, made a whore of his mother. Those men had angered him. And then they had made him laugh .... He had taken first to women, then to drink, and finally to drugs." The ubiquitous nature of corruption is such that not only persons like Himmat Singh, Rathor, the Secretary, and the

26. Ibid., p. 144.
27. Ibid., p. 145.
Minister, but the pujari in the temple which Rathor frequents is also not free from it. When his son's payment is stopped, he approaches Rathor for help. The pujari's son is a contractor and builds three hundred quarters for slum-dwellers in a record time. The new engineer refuses to pass the bills because he notices too much sand in the mortar. Eventhough Rathor tells him that his department is different, the pujari persists in his request, and as Rathor puts it, "He said he would not mind if he spent some money to get all that done. Everyone had the right to a cut. He said he understood that. He could suitably meet the desires of all concerned, the clerks, the officers, of the engineer concerned, even, here he asked me to forgive his impudence, even mine. MINE. MINE. He said he was a poor man and could hardly afford bribes but he did not mind it in a case like that. After all, he said, we all had to live. And that boy was his only son. He said he would give me any reasonable cut that I demanded." The pujari's problem and the means he employs to solve it characterize a society in which all values are inseparably tied to the craft of making money. As it usually happens, the more the money the greater the

28The Apprentice, p. 124.
frustration that accompanies it. The narrator, in spite of his awareness, fails to get out of the corruption racket. He finds his daughter and his wife always showing some sort of discontent. Eventhough he doesn't need money, he takes a bribe. As he reflects,

First of all, I did not need the money. I am quite sure of that. I needed it no more than sitting here, after two cups of tea, I need a third. I may drink it because others do, or because it is offered free, but I need it for neither survival nor happiness. In this poor land I can be called comfortable, even well-off. I have a car, a flat, a concrete roof, running water. I have a refrigerator. My wife is not swimming in sarees but she does not even use what she has. My daughter has all the money she needs; for college, clothes, and the cinema. We eat as much as a human being can possibly eat. Our health is looked after by the government. There are delays no doubt but with a bit of telephoning-- I have a telephone which is not common--one always gets it. I have insurance. I have twenty thousand in the bank which is not a fortune but will tide you over a rainy day. Besides, I would have pension when I retire which should be enough for me and my wife. My daughter, God willing, should be married by then.
So, you see, I did not need the money. If I had ever needed money it was when I had been offered it the first time—by the contractor—and I had refused.  

The above passage, while revealing the tormenting and tortuous self-examination of the self when it is sorting out its own problems, unmistakably suggests some of the civilized values that obtain in a metropolis. The self-analysis makes the narrator discover that along with money one involves oneself in other new distractions like women and power, and becomes crazy about "brand-new enjoyment." As he reflects, "I was expected to behave. Instead, I had merely walked into a brothel hounded by a strange disturbance. All that I could think of was my money and the fact that I was not enjoying life or what I imagined 'enjoying' life meant. 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" (emphasis added).  

The word "death," in the preceding citation, obliquely suggests that a distracted life is death of the self. This may look like a philosophical common-

29 The Apprentice, p. 61.

30 Ibid., p. 78.

31 Ibid., p. 89.
place, but a close look at The Apprentice reveals that there are ways of coming out of death, or what the narrator calls "the crookedness of the world; the crookedness of oneself."\textsuperscript{32}

As we have noticed earlier, retrieving souls that are pawned is an awesome process. The narrator-protagonist becomes an apprentice in order to learn the method of retrieving his own soul. Without entering the temple, he wipes the shoes of the congregation. He tells himself, "Be good. Be decent. Be of use. 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 have helped and did not."\textsuperscript{33} Activating the self in this solemn mood of penitence and expiation, which we have noticed earlier in the protagonist of The Foreigner, Sindi Oberoi, is amplified and given a symbolic resonance in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas and in The Apprentice. In The Last Labyrinth, this is very convincingly dramatized in Anuradha's decision to give up her relationship with Som Bhaskar.

In all his novels, Joshi employs first-person narration, which is disapproved of by Henry James, the champion

\textsuperscript{32}The Apprentice, p. 148.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., pp. 148-149.
of the "well-made novel." As Percy Lubbock, a Jamesian theorist, says, "It is very useful for enhancing the value of a picture, where none but the pictorial method is available, where we are bound to rely upon an intervening storyteller in some guise or other; it is much more satisfactory to know who the storyteller is, and to see him as a part of the story, than to be deflected away from the book by the author, an arbitrary, unmeasurable, unappraisable factor. But when the man in the book is expected to make a picture of himself, a searching and elaborate portrait, then the limit of his capacity is touched and passed; or rather there is a better method, one of finer capacity, then ready to the author's hand, and there is no reason to be content with the hero's mere report" (emphasis added). A significant point that Lubbock makes in the above citation is that in telling his own story within the framework and conventions of realism, the hero or the protagonist cannot overreach himself. In the three novels of Joshi we have just discussed, the first-person narration has restricted the meaning and the scope of the hero's role, thereby curtailing the significance of the novel as a whole. In The Last Labyrinth, Joshi seems to find

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a solution to this creative problem. He employs symbols well-known in Western literature, and generates new meaning to those symbols. As Gabriel Josipovici writes, "From the cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues of 'Gerontion,' through the mazes of Kafka, Proust, Beckett, Borges and Robbe-Grillet, the labyrinth has been the favourite image of modern literature."  

The Cretan myth of the labyrinth and the Minotaur has been creatively used and variously interpreted by the writers mentioned in the above citation. The traditional reading of the myth brings out the worth of man as a hero and a quester. Borges in his story "The House of Asterion" deglamorizes the hero's triumph. Borges's story emphasizes the essential loneliness of man, and the pitiable nature of his existence and the brittleness of all speculative instruments that analyze it. The profound implications of the tale are suggested in what Theseus tells Ariadne, "The Minotaur scarcely defended himself."  

It looks as though the relevance of the Cretan myth to our own time consists in the Minotaur's awareness of his loneliness and alienation and not in the triumph of Theseus. The Borgesian reorientation of

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the myth is relevant to our understanding of Joshi's 
*The Last Labyrinth*. The theme of alienation and loneli­
ness in *The Last Labyrinth* is repeatedly suggested by the 
frequent use of the word "void." For example, Som Bhaskar, 
crossing the Manikarinka ghat, reflects,

And here, on Manikarnika, were voids with a 
 bang. Both within and without. That was 
 probably how it had always been except that 
 I had been too cocky to notice. You have to 
 have a little "incident" or get a telephone 
 at midnight about so and so popping off or 
 catch your wife with another man or be told 
 you have cancer to see the voids within. It 
 was the voids and not the guava groves that I 
 had walked through that morning my mother died; 
 and voids too in her room in Bombay; and voids 
 each time an affair ended; and the morning my 
 daughter was born, and on and on. Voids all. 37

The above passage brings into the fold of "void" 
 birth, copulation, and death. It is at the root of Som's 
 obsessive cry, "I want, I want, I want." The following 
 dialogue between Leela Sabnis and Som repeats the point:

"I am not fond of you," she told me one 
 evening. "That would be lying, but I am con­
 cerned, I am worried. Tell me, what makes

37 Arun Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth* (New Delhi: Orient 
 Paperbacks, 1981), p. 48. All subsequent page references 
 are to this edition.
you tick?"

"The voids," I said without enthusiasm.

"The voids? what voids?"

"I hear this song way up in the sky. All the time."

"What song?"

"I want; I want; I want."

"I want, I want, I want. Just like that?"

"Yes."38

Like the other protagonists of Joshi, Som Bhaskar seems to suffer from an excessive and unwarranted introspection. In one of his introspective moods he picks up the image, and the passage has a diagnostic implication:

I had failed to make Geeta happy, or be anything more than a stranger to my children. My friends thought me a nut. I had been neglecting my companies. I had not even got over my mother's death. Or my father's, or the oppressive turbulence of the voids that never let me alone. Then, there was the greatest sorrow of them all—that no one even guessed: There was the sorrow of idleness.39

38The Last Labyrinth, p. 78.

Leela Sabnis's psycho-analysis, the various psychiatrists he consults, and his doctor-friend, Kashyap, cannot help Som fill the voids in his existence.

The specificity and the evocative brilliance of the void image are comparable to the Borgesian story mentioned earlier in this discussion. But Joshi uses "labyrinth" as a metaphor that signifies soul/self not only in this novel but in his other novels also. In The Last Labyrinth, it appears as a creative comment on the void image. Som's "voids," obsessions, and fornications impinge on Aftab Rai, Anuradha, and their residence, Lal Haveli, in Benaras. When he visits Aftab Rai's residence for the first time, Aftab tells him that "It is all run down now, this haveli, but its labyrinth remains." When Som asks Aftab, "And what is in the last labyrinth?" he says, "Why, death, of course." Death appears to be the dominating motif in the text and recurs in crucial contexts. Som Bhaskar seems to sink in the voids within and make a desperate attempt to disentangle himself from the voids without. His consciousness, in its attempt to overreach itself for a total explanation of the void, gets stuck in the labyrinth which Aftab, Anuradha,

40 The Last Labyrinth, p. 35.

41 Ibid., p. 37.
and Gargi find meaningful in terms of their private vision. The death motif is amplified in the text so as to make it converge on the labyrinth image, as, for example, in the following passage:

Was this maroon Blue Room a part of the labyrinth, too? If so, what was I doing here amidst these strangers? If someone, man or god, had watched my life from a great height, would I have appeared to him like an ant threading through a maze, knocking about, against one wall, then another? Were there spirits buried in these walls, deep down in forlorn dungeons? My mother believed in spirits. So probably did these people. 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 what one wanted. Or, maybe, to know was what I wanted. To know. Just that. No more. No less. This, then, was a labyrinth, too, this going forward and backward and sideways of the mind. I felt again the faint stirrings of a curiosity that I had first felt near the marble sarcophagus, a secret curiosity that I dare not share with another.\footnote{The Last Labyrinth, p. 53.}

In the passage under review, the central images of
the novel are subtly brought together. Som Bhaskar's cry, "I want, I want," points to the "void" in the background. The image "an ant threading through a maze" and the word "miracles" bring the "labyrinth" to the foreground. The miracle is associated with Gargi, who is a deaf-mute. But she communicates through signs, gestures, and writing. The daughter of a **Sufi Pir**, she is a devotee of Lord Krishna and worships **Srīchakra**. We learn that her father gave Aftab his eyesight. Her grandfather had promised God his life if God spared his son's life; the son lived and the father died. Anuradha gives up Som in order to make Gargi give him a new lease of life. Som's escape from certain death caused by a stroke is indeed a miracle. His wife, Geeta, and his physician, Dr. Kashyap, are aware of it. Dr. Kashyap and Som go to the hill-temple to receive Aftab's shares from Lord Krishna (that is, from the temple authorities). Kashyap tells Gargi, "I am a medical doctor. I do not believe in things in which Anuradha believes. But I know for a fact that Som had no chance whatsoever and I want to know: Did you save him? Anuradha says you did. And in return for what you did, she says, you made her promise that she would give up Som. For ever. That to her, Som would be dead, either way. Is this true? Please tell
But Gargi refuses to give any positive reply.

From the foregoing analysis, it follows that Som's "voids" are not unreal. He seems to comprehend life only in terms of alienation, aridity of feeling, and a sense of inner frustration. The persistent cry in the void appears to be "I want," which is juxtaposed with the whisper "I give," which constantly echoes in the labyrinth. This *discordia concors* can be clarified by analysing the character of Anuradha.

Anuradha is the daughter of a disreputable woman, who was killed by one of her desperate lovers with a broken whiskey bottle. Anuradha, an orphan, grows up under the guardianship of her aunt in Bombay. Her original name is Meera. The name is very significant, because of the various visual and aural images of Krishna that proliferate through the text. Rechristened Anuradha, she spends some time in the film-world and gets out of it with the help of Aftab Rai, who introduces her to Gargi. She meets Som Bhaskar in one of the meetings of the shareholders connected with the production of plastic goods. Even in their first meeting she fascinates Som, and he is prepared to lose anything to retain

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43 *The Last Labyrinth*, p. 206.
her love. Whatever her antecedents may be, Anuradha is a labyrinthine woman, at once young and old, ancient and modern, and furious in lust and divine in love. She is every man's woman and no man's wife. She tells Som, "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." We may add that she is also married to Krishna. In Joshi's text, the labyrinth earns the status of a metaphor for the various levels of consciousness immanent in the Krishna legend. As Som Bhaskar puts it, "There was nothing simple about Krishna. Had it been so, He would not have survived ten thousand years. He would have died along with the gods of the Pharaohs, the Sumerians, the Incas. Krishna was about as simple as the labyrinths of Aftab's Haveli." Som Bhaskar's vengeful pursuit of Aftab's shares takes him to the hill-temple where Gargi lives. What he sees there—for example, an old man making a hard journey along with his grandson to breathe his last in full awareness of entering the realm of death—makes him think of his question to Aftab and Aftab's answer:

44. *The Last Labyrinth*, p. 128.

"And what is in the last labyrinth?"
"In the last labyrinth?"
"Yes."
"Why, death, of course."
I looked at him, puzzled.
"I meant the labyrinth of this house."

As we have noted earlier, in discussing The Apprentice, the self, in shaping and learning the art of retrieving itself from voids, may sometimes enter a labyrinth, which is a metaphor for itself. In Joshi's novels, the juxtaposition of the void and the labyrinth images seems to suggest that there are two significant ways of making sense of life and the self. Life is not meaningful without the self's involvement in the family and society. As we have seen in Borges's retelling of the Cretan myth, there is a shift in the meaning and the perspective of the myth. The Minotaur is not a monster imprisoned in a labyrinth. He seems to suggest the theme of alienation and the encumbered self that has lost its moorings ever since the death of God. In Joshi's novels, this is signified by the void image. As Billy Biswas puts it, "Any choice worth its name is drastic," and leads to a labyrinth. "Conventional expedients of the age" lead

46 The Last Labyrinth, p. 37.
47 The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 190.
48 Ibid., p. 190.
to a void. Labyrinths are meaningful and make sense of life. They offer a total explanation for life and flux. Voids and wastelands are at best only half truths. The labyrinth as a metaphor for the various levels of awareness the self can attain is not without the echoes of Mino's legend. The Minotaur that one has to face in life's labyrinth is ultimately the self, maybe the naked self. Leela Sabins, in spite of her adherence to Des Cartes' *Cogito ergo sum*, keeps the two worlds— the world of matter and the world of spirit—separate. As Som puts it, "In the world of matter we had fed on sex and now we were satiated. In the world of spirit we still enjoyed conversation. The two worlds, by her lights, did not meet, could not meet." While Leela Sabnis, a student of philosophy, fails to make sense of life and fails to make Som's life meaningful, a fusion of matter and spirit, Anuradha achieves it and saves Som from certain death.

Arun Joshi's themes have contemporary relevance and socio-cultural significance. *The Apprentice*, for example, is a creative comment on the crisis of character with which we have been familiar for a long time. But what we should

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49 The Last Labyrinth, pp. 81-82.
not forget in reading the novel is its claim to be considered a novel, not a sociological study of the roots and causes of corruption. This observation applies with equal force to the other novels as well. The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is not about the manners and customs of the primitive tribes in Jhansi District but about Billy's sensitive response to certain unusual psychic phenomena and his whole-hearted pursuit of the meaning behind them. The narrator finds it difficult to convince his father and his wife that Billy's desertion of the family and society was propelled by some incoherent spiritual pursuit. They feel that "Billy had probably done something undesirable on a momentary impulse (I think she had something sexual in mind), something even more degrading than his affair with Rima Kaul, and did not have the courage to face his family. He might even have done it under duress. All along he had wanted to go back to them but was not sure how he would be received." But the narrator and the reader know the psychic compulsion behind the leap of Biswas into an unknown and nebulous terrain. Explaining to the narrator the peculiar situation, Billy says, "It was as though a master mind had arranged the whole thing..."
to give me a preview of what awaited me if I continued to defy its call. Poor Rima had crystallized for me the alterna­tives, although I did not realize this until I sat outside my tent that fateful night. I had two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay. I suppose most men are faced with similar questions sometime or the other. As we have noticed earlier, the choice to make a leap so that the self may be retrieved from decay is brilliantly exempli­fied in Anuradha in *The Last Labyrinth*, when she takes the painful decision of snapping her links with Som Bhaskar so that he may live. These crucial decisions may plunge the self into an unknown terrain where the self, the family, and society acquire new meaning. The new meaning emerges as a thera­peutic process, a sort of cleansing. The self becomes an apprentice to itself, so that it may explore the labyrinth which is itself. As Ratan Rathor frankly confesses, "Then there is another thing that my father used to say, something in­fact that his father had told him. Remember, he would say, whatever you do touches someone somewhere." In fine, Arun Joshi's novels dramatize the truth embodied in Rathor's con-

51 *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, pp. 189-190.

52 *The Apprentice*, p. 149.
fession by forging an aesthetic pattern in which we come across dreams, stories within stories, characters experiencing hallucinations, and visions verbalized and reconstructed.