Arun Joshi won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth*, published in 1981. Basically a love story, it explores the hero’s search for the meaning of life. The novel deals with detachment principles and the longing for the essentials of life in the mystical urge of the narrator-hero, Som Bhaskar. The protagonist relates the various events of his life through a series of flash-backs. Like the protagonists of Arun Joshi’s earlier novels, Som also belongs to the upper strata of society and his quest of life too, like theirs, unfold the meaning of life.

The novelist presents Som as a successful man, who at a very early age attains everything in life-wealth, education and even a wonderful wife. He becomes a millionaire and inherits an empire in plastic factory. His education at Harvard teaches him the ways of life and after his return to Bombay his primary aspiration is to annex the failing industries to his dominion. The novelist portrays Som Bhaskar as a modern anti-hero, embodying chaos and uncertainty. He suffers from an indefinable hunger, a restlessness and the great desire: “I want, I want” (*L.L* 11) haunts throughout his life. He is never at peace with himself and spends sleepless nights, drinking and taking tranquilizers. He goes on desperately living,
clinging to one thing or person and trying to seek satisfaction in sex, wealth and fame but finds himself increasingly restless and realizes that “I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus”. (L.L. 107). He feels a void, and idleness and loneliness within himself leading towards endless self-questioning till he is lost in the labyrinth of thoughts. Som was seized by a similar experience of void, some years back inside the caves of Ajanta.

It was cool inside and dark. Then the walls started to float in trembling shimmering, doubled here and there with colour. The colours were faint, as they are in dreams. I had stood there trying to make sense out of them. And then, as gradually as they had materialized, the walls dissolved into the darkness. I continued to stand there until I was cooler. The walls came and went in dizzy waves, the daubs of colour dancing before my eyes. The spasms of darkness grew steadily longer. Or, so it had seemed. Finally, I could not stand it any longer. When the wall disappeared once again I dashed out (L.L. 47)

The novelist makes it clear that after Som’s childhood experience of void, he is haunted by voids both external and internal and keeps on having strange dizzy dark experiences throughout his life. He discloses:
It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and empty spaces within and without. (L.L. 47)

Arun Joshi explores and intensifies Som’s dilemma by focussing attention on his relationship with the other characters of the novel. His grand father was a man of town, fond of women and drinks. His father, a scientist, spent all his life in search of truth and the First Cause. We get to know of his personality from the following dialogue with his son, Som Bhaskar.

There was neither death nor immortality then. “Then, mind you “nor a sign of day or night. And darkness hidden in darkness”. “Who knows the truth? Who can tell whence and how arose the universe. The Gods are later than its beginning: Who knows, therefore, whence comes this creation? Only that God who sees in highest heaven; He only knows whence came this universe. He only knows. Or perhaps, He knows not. What do you make of this? (L.L. 155).

Som, thus inherits the qualities of both father and grandfather-- for he is a womanizer, a boozzer, a highly impulsive man and greatly thirsty for knowledge. Another aspect of Som’s life is sketched by his mother and his wife who are symbols of endurance. His mother suffers everything silently,
but her love and faith in Krishna never diminishes. Later she dies of "Cancer and Krishna". His wife Geeta, modern, intelligent and sophisticated has a "trust like birds fly, like fish swim". (L.L.63). The novelist portrays Geeta as a great, big giver of herself. If Som’s trademark is the discontentment then Geeta’s is trust. She is aware of the pitfalls of the world. She is all a wife could be - trusting, beautiful and well mannered. She remains loyal and possesses a sense of tolerance and courage by supporting Som even during his infidelity towards her. He needed her trust to anchor himself to the world of trust and morality. He confesses:

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. Between the empty home and the cluttered offices - so many men, unknown, unknowable, each with a quiver of axes to grind- between these two poles of existence, friendless in a city that I did not love and which, for that matter, did not love me, even though it eyed my money, in this whore of a city what I needed most was to be reassured that all was well. (L.L. 63).

Som knows that his is a happy marriage and he cannot imagine a life without Geeta and yet he fornicates. He says:
It is a happy marriage from what anyone, including myself can make out. I couldn't imagine life without Geeta. But, then and here is the big question - why these little fornications?

He runs again and again to different women especially the scholarly Leela Sabnis, who he thinks had an answer for all his weird questions. Throughout his life he is in search of someone who has the ability to settle the contradictions of his life. He does not find it in his wife nor in the clever Professor Leela Sabnis. She had been divorced by her husband for her unnatural love for reading. She attracts him more powerfully. But Leela's world of reason and mystery does not satisfy him. "His hunger is of body and spirit both. Hunger of body is a cry for emotional authentication and hunger of spirit is an yearning for self - realization". Here the novelist depicts the frustrations and dissatisfaction in the protagonist's life.

Arun Joshi, picturizes the protagonist's search for his roots and identification. But in this novel the protagonist's confrontation is not with the society but with forms and forces beyond the reckonings or reason and science.
Som Bhaskar finds the world meaningless as his troubles get multiplied because of "the terrible loneliness" of his heart (L.L. 23). As time passes he becomes even more convinced that life is full of complication "a labyrinth within the labyrinths" (L.L.29). He compares life to meaningless flights of stairs". (L.L. 37) or "a fisherman's net" (L.L. 34). Here the novelist depicts the protagonist's awareness of the lack of significance in life. Som, because of his grim experiences of life develops a hatred towards the world, and he is disgusted with the people and himself. We notice that though Arun Joshi's heroes cannot fathom the real problems of life, yet death is something all the heroes detest. Like his father, Ratan and Sindi, Som too is vexed by the very thought of death. He says: "There was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death". (L.L.15) Inspite of the realization that "death is to wind up all" (L.L. 65), he rushes about frantically in search of happiness and meaning in life. Though he knows that life is full of troubles and pain yet he exclaims:

"How happy I must be to have no problems in life" (L.L.98)

The novelist here presents the protagonist's utmost desire to attain happiness, peace and satisfaction in life even though he knows it is out of his reach. It is this yearning for wealth, happiness and success that brings him to Benaras with the sole motive of buying all the shares of Aftab Rai, a decaying King of Plastic Industries.
Som Bhaskar meet Anuradha for the first-time in a Delhi hotel at a reception organized by Aftab Rai for the Plastic Manufactures Association. He is irresistibly drawn towards her. Anuradha appears to him like a monument: tall handsome and ruined and notices that she was obsolete like her husband. But yet a strange attraction pulls him towards her, irrespective of her age and colour. The novelist picturizes the protagonist Som as being attracted and fascinated by an antique looking woman, Anuradha, dressed in antiques and living in an antique haveli of the more antique environs of Benaras.

She had the features of women one saw in Moghul miniatures. I was fascinated (L.L.19).

She gradually becomes the centre of his life and the yearning to be with her brings him often to Aftab’s Lal haveli.

Anuradha becomes an obsession, a passion for Som. He cannot think of anything other than her and he neglects his business, his family and his health in an effort to win her. He makes frequent trips to Benaras with the sole motive of acquiring her for himself. He finds her attractive and sees in her a personality very different from anyone he had ever known. But to certain extent Anuradha remains a mystery to him and at times finds it difficult to understand her real self.
There was mystery about Anuradha that I had yet to crack. She should have been no more to me than a woman trying to save her lover's (husband's?) property. She should have been transparent. Why should she appear mysterious unless, possibly, there was a mystery within me that, in her proximity, got somehow stirred, as one tuning fork might stir another. (L.L. 89).

Anuradha has had an insecure childhood as the illegitimate child of an insane mother. She is subjected to considerable suffering right from her childhood. The novelist presents the agony and tortures suffered by Anuradha through the words of Dr. K.

Illegitimate child, insane mother, no home. Molested as a child. Witness to murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world. Can you imagine what a childhood she must have had? (L.L. 190).

The novelist intensifies the sufferings of Anuradha by making Dr. K. confess "My life has been spent amidst misery and suffering but I know of no other human being who suffer as much as Anuradha".

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Apart from all this her aunt takes undue advantage of her and exploits her by putting her into film world and making her the prey of the producer's lust. It is Aftab who liberates her from that tormenting world and gives a new meaning and value to her life and with whom she has been living till now without any formal marriage. She says:

"You can't marry everyone you love. So why marry anyone at all?" (L.L. 43)

The novelist presents Anuradha as an independent woman who does not wish to marry any particular person. According to her:

"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." (L.L. 128)

Like Som, Anuradha also inherits from her mother a belief in faith and possesses a higher worldly wisdom than Som even though she is not born of a high family and well educated like him. In her own way she is fond of Som, and yields to him on many occasions, but does not want to be possessed or owned by anybody.
Som becomes a prey to women, wealth and wine which wreck his life and peace of mind. The novelist through the dilemma and torture of Som depicts his failure in achieving happiness, peace and satisfaction in life. Inspite of his sexual relationship with different women, he is dissatisfied due to his spiritual hollowness. From the very beginning a sense of curiosity is gnawing inside him but we find no sign of spiritual growth in him. The novelist depicts Som's incapability in totally or completely surrendering himself including his intellect and rational power, as a result of which he is not able to achieve unwavering faith. Aftab feels that Som is destined to be doomed in tension. He tells 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 (L.L. 166)

Som does not try to solve the contradictions of life through faith nor does he attempt to change his desire from the animalistic to spiritual. The novelist presents Som as a representative of the Westernized Indian aristocracy which has lost its spiritual roots. Som does not realize that the labyrinths of life can be resolved through faith rather than science and reason. Gargi makes it clear to him that "there is no harm in believing that
God exists". (L.L. 213) But Som's intellect is reminded of Pascal and Pascalian suggestion and therefore cannot instil faith in him.

Aftab Rai, also a plastic manufacturer is the antithesis of Som. He is a man of culture and refinement, more Oriental than Western. Though not a good businessman but he possesses the finer feeling for life. He loves Anuradha but does not claim any ownership on her. His love for her is deep but not possessive. And he respects her personality and never imposes himself on her. Mr. Thapan described Aftab Rai as "a rather peculiar person" (L.L. 12) and "a secretive sort of a man" (L.L. 13). On meeting Aftab in Delhi, Som found him obsolete and antique. He gets the impression that "he is not organized enough to survive (L.L. 20) in the world of business. But Anuradha, who "has a reputation of being clever, shrewd" very well recognises Som's plans and frankly tells him:

You are here to grab his business, aren't you?" ...................

"You can give it any name you like but isn't it his business that you are after. (L.L. 18)

The novelist here portrays Anuradha as a woman gifted with special vision and understanding.
Som's search for the meaning of life becomes terribly complicated as he yearns for the best of both the worlds - the world of matter and of spirit. He confesses:

What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined. (L. L. 82)

The novelist projects Som as a person who is frustrated and disillusioned and suffers in life due to his habit of "romanticizing .......... blowing things larger than life". (L. L. 189)

Som's meeting with Gargi is made possible by Aflab and Anuradha. Gargi, a fair, rosy, ascetic woman of forty, is deaf and dumb but communicates by writing on her pad. Anuradha reveals to Som the mysterious power and strength of Gargi who is the daughter of a Prince later turned into a Sufi. It is he who restored the eyesight of Aflab which seems unbelievable to Som. All the tales regarding Gargi and her father seem unreal and a fantasy to Som. At this Anuradha remarks:

You are wrong about many things. You are wrong even about yourself. You think you know lot, when, in fact, you don't. (L. L. 61).
Som's lust for Anuradha exceeds all limits and he tries to possess her but he is thrown away by her and she tells him frankly:

I know you want something. You badly want something. I could see that the first time we met. But it is not me. That, too, I can see. I told you so in the dargah. (L.L. 58-59).

Anuradha's rejection of him, makes Som depressed. He tries hard to free himself from an obsession for her. He tours round the world along with his wife, in order to suppress his growing desire for Anuradha but is unsuccessful in his attempt and becomes more and more discontented with life. He goes to see Gargi in Benaras to seek solace for his restlessness. She instils hope and confidence in him by saying, "God will send someone to help you someone who has known suffering". (L.L. 118).

Som's relentless pursuit of Anuradha becomes the centre of his entire existence and the purpose of his quest. He finds Anuradha indispensable to him but recalls Gargi's warning, "Don't quarrel. She is your Shakti" (L.L. 121). This thought makes him to come to that haveli over and over again and each meeting with Anuradha intensifies his passion for her instead of cooling it.
It was fated to return to that haveli over and over. We possessed each other with singular ferocity, neither willing to loosen the clasp. Yet each meeting, far from cooling my passions served only to fuel them. I lived on the nourishment of the shades thrown by her naked body under the chromatic shower. (L.L.121-22).

When Anuradha realizes that Som wishes to win her heart too and not merely possess her body she simply disappears from his life. Here the novelist depicts the idea of sacrifice on the part of Anuradha by making her leave the scene at the height of their love affair. Commenting on this incident Arun Joshi himself says:

Anuradha's role in the novel is to lead Bhaskar through the subconscious. Then he loses her. I was hinting at the old classical dictum that you do not get anything without sacrificing something. So she is to be taken away from him".

Som, from "these penumbral regions" returns to Bombay but he has a massive heart attack which nearly kills him. As soon as he recovers he tries to contact Anuradha who refuses to meet him. This indifference of hers
enrages him and he decides to take revenge on Anuradha and Aftab by ruining their business. He buys all the shares of Aftab. In order to acquire the shares of Anuradha, he sets out on an arduous journey to the temple of Krishna on the high mountain disregarding his health. Here we see Som as a man of determination and full of revenge.

At the temple of Krishna, Som is surprised to see Gargi and is further more astounded when he learns that he survived the heart attack mainly due to Anuradha's prayers and pleas to Gargi to save him. Dr. Kashyap recalls the event,

She told you what I had told her. That there was no hope for Som. she begged you to save him. ..........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 you 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 Som (L.L.205).

Arun Joshi beautifully presents Anuradha's sacrifice through Dr. Kashyup's words. We see that though she loves Som deeply, she does not
reveal it to him. She just gives her love and herself to him without expecting anything in return. Later on to give life to Som, she alienates herself from him and the society. She pays a heavy price to save him, she vows to Gargi that she would give up Som if she cures him from his illness.

Som now realizes that both Geeta and Anuradha had ganged up in order to "save" him both physically and spiritually. But he finds it difficult to believe that a miracle had saved him. He thinks Dr. K. has cooked up a story at the spur of the moment. But next day he goes to Gargi to get Anuradha's shares and tells her that he wanted the shares to settle an account with Anuradha who jilted him after his illness. He admits.

I cannot give to Anuradha, you know that. In the absence of evidence I intend to challenge the whole thing. I want to take not only these shares but also Anuradha. It scares me but I have no choice (L.L. 213).

Gargi advises him and tries to evade him from taking revenge on anyone. She tells him, "God does not seek revenge. Man's ........... vanity (ahankar) brings him revenge enough". (L.L. 213-214) Som assures her that he is not arrogant or vain; only curious to know things and wants evidence to believe
things, even in God. But at the same time he tells her that he is determined that he would not give up Anuradha on any condition;

As for Anuradha ---------- as for her I can't give her up on these ......... flimsy grounds. I can't live without her. You should know that. (*L.L. 214*).

The novelist here presents Som as egoistic and stubborn person who always tries to have his own way. Som goes to Benaras to claim Anuradha from Aftab. But Aftab begs him to leave them alone. He tells him:

I wish you had left us alone. Anuradha and I need each other .................. I told you, you are different. You don't understand us. 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 a bit of it. You are empty of that understanding (*L.L. 217*).

Aftab permits him to meet Anuradha seeing his stubborn attitude. Anuradha also entreats him to go away as his life could be in danger in the haveli. Som recollects,
Aftab. But Aftab begs him to leave them alone. He tells him:

I wish you had left us alone. Anuradha and I need each other ................. I told you, you are different. You don't understand us. 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 a bit of it. You are empty of that understanding (L.L. 217).

Aftab permits him to meet Anuradha seeing his stubborn attitude. Anuradha also entreats him to go away as his life could be in danger in the haveli. Som recollects,

"Go away now" she said pushing me towards the door.

May be she was right. May be she needed time to handle Aftab Rai. (L.L. 219)

But Som does not realize that Anuradha was pushing him out of her life for ever. With Anuradha's disappearance Som starts feeling more isolated and lonely and a sense of inadequacy, restlessness and aimlessness develops in him. He is anxious to know what he wants; and the desire to know is a
to make Geeta happy, or be anything more than a stranger to my children
................ Then, there was the greatest sorrow of idleness. (L.L. 109).

Som's obstinate questioning, however does not solve the riddle of life for him. He has a great eagerness to know the meaning of life. He tells Gargi:

I want to know. Probably I want to believe. But one can't
order belief. I must have evidence. (L.L. 213)

His approach to life is more or less scientific -- seeking evidence for everything, as a result he is not able to trace the secret of life and peace. Frustrated within himself, he finds this world alien having no value, no meaning, or truth. In desperation he starts pitying himself like a person who is completely vanquished by life. His only wish now is "a peaceful death" (L.L. 164), for he is mercilessly torn apart by his doubts. Aftab says to him:

You are being torn apart by your own doubts. Your doubts
are the wolves that are going to eat you up. (L.L. 164)

Som's own "strange mad thoughts" seem to devour him. He is also carrying with him the terrible curse of Aftab:

How I hate you ............ curse you ............ you escaped to
the hotel that nigh ............ but how long ............ your

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time will come .......... while you live you will rot
.............. when dead you shall not find peace
................ from one graveyard to another you will
wander ........... a million years. (L. L. 222).

He now realizes that all human beings, whether be it Anuradha, Gargi or
Geeta, everyone possessed one thing in common-- hatred. Life has become
almost a nightmare for Som and he has lost his peace of mind and is
incapable of paying adequate attention to the world and its demands and
duties. His business is also reduced to a "big mess" (L. L. 223).

Finally he tries to kill himself with his grand-father's gun which he
carried with him like a curse wherever he went, but he is stopped by his
wife Geeta, who shakes him "gently as though rousing a man from sleep".
(L.L. 224) The novelist here gives a little clue for us to hope that the
unquestioning trust and patience of Geeta will restore peace in Som's life.

Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* presents a strange case, not of Billy
Biswa but of Som Bhaskar, whose mind hovers between two worlds -- the
world of religion and spirit and the world of science and realities. "The
strangeness of Som Bhaskar's case lies in his curiosity about the food for the
spirit and his total surrender to the hunger of the body, the former not going
deeper than his skin and the latter absorbing him heart and soul."4

Som Bhaskar, like Sindi Oberoi of The Foreigner, has the genes of
two cultures in him. Though born and brought up in India, he has his
education abroad. Like Sindi, Som acts as a foreigner to the environment
and also to himself. Besides, Som is a psychological case. A feeling of
insecurity, hollowness, restlessness haunt him throughout his life. Som's
restlessness is different from that of Billy and Sindi. Billy feels estranged
in the commercial and money oriented civilization. But it is not the case
with Som as he is quite at home in the commercial world of Bombay. His
inflections are internal and the impulses of reason, doubt and faith create a
tension in him. Thus emotionally Som has become a labyrinth. Som's
search is in many ways similar to Billy Biswas's. Both are in search of
something unknown. Arun Joshi himself states,

Yes, there is similarity between the two. The faceless God
is prominent in Billy Biswas's inner thoughts. One finds the
same facelessness in Som Bhaskar.5

The Last Labyrinth explores the crannies of Som's mind. Som is a split
self. Like Jungian or Pirandellian man he is full of inner disharmony and
is a loose cluster of masks or fragments of identity.6
Arun Joshi's novel gives the clear impression that he was greatly influenced by Camus, Sartre and similar other existential writers. However we cannot forget the fact that apart from being influenced by various existential writers, he was inspired tremendously by *The Bhagavad Gita*, though he had his education abroad and had imbibed the western ways of life. Joshi tries to present the essence of Indian spiritual heritage in all his novels. Every protagonist of his novels resolves the contradictions of his life through faith except Som Bhaskar.

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 a God and if you have met Him and if He is willing to listen, then, Anuradha, my soul, tell Him, tell this God, to have mercy upon me. Tell Him I am weary. Of so many fears; so much doubting. Of this dark earth and these empty heavens. Plead for me Anuradha. He will listen to you *(L.L. 222-223).*
Till the end of the strange thoughts occur in his mind and questions his mind as to "Are they the harbingers, the pilot-escort of melancholia? Of insanity? Faith?" (L.L.223). He adds to his dilemma doubting whether to believe or not to believe.

The novel The Last Labyrinth fails to resolve Som's dilemma. The Bhagavad Gita preaches: "He who has no faith and no wisdom, and whose soul is in doubt, is lost". Som too is lost in the whirlpool of doubts and questions of life and death without attaining any fulfilment; thus he continues to remain alienated. Usually Joshi's heroes find their fulfilment and progress from alienation to existential affirmation. But The Last Labyrinth is an exception. Joshi himself says:

Alienation of my novels which I have written so far ultimately leads them back to community. I realized that in my latest The Last Labyrinth for the first time it does not happen.7

Som is like Abhimanyu in The Mahabharata who is not able to come out of the "Chakravyuha". Bhaskar loses himself in the "Chakravyuha" of life and death, reality and truth, doubt and faith.8
The novelist in this novel reveals through the protagonist the idea that Western values do not provide peace and sublimity of self-fulfilment. In a sense, Joshi contrasts the Western and Indian ways of life in this novel. The novelist presents these two worlds through a series of symbols. Bhaskar's mother, his wife Geeta, Gargi are symbols of endurance and faith. Anuradha symbolises the spirit of sacrifice and she is a saint - sinner-adulteress endowed with love and tenderness. She is filled with the milk of human kindness. The word "Labyrinth" symbolises the mysterious experiences of Som while searching for his identity and truth. Joshi presents Gargi as a symbol of a living proof of God's presence.

The novelist explores the working of Som's inner mind as to what he feels about life, love and death through a series of dreams which haunt him again and again. The dreams are used as a symbolic representation of the revolt against the logical and rational control of Som's world. Som's dreams of flying in the sky is a symbol of his deep desire of rising high in life. The emptiness of outer surroundings are symbolic of the inner emptiness of modern human being. The frequent dreams of death refer to Som's great fear of death. Thus dreams are used to reflect the symbols of God, death, man, love and life in Som. Som's dreams are the expressions of his culture, values and the unfulfilled desires and yearnings of his life. The language of the dreams becomes the language of the inner Som.
Som Bhaskar continues to suffer the pangs of alienation, and finds no solution for his existential problems and questings; but he realises that man's dilemma is not the consequences of the causes or situation but is rooted in man himself. Som's dilemma lies deep down in his own self and consciousness.

Hari Mohan Prasad has rightly remarked that, 'Bhaskar's dilemma has crystallized the sociological, psychological and metaphysical dimensions of human existence into Joshi's unique vision of modern man's predicament. Som Bhaskar is an archetype of the new man and *The Last Labyrinth* is a fictional tour-de-force on the chaos of existence and crisis consciousness.9

The labyrinth metaphor is spread out thick all over the text of the novel, starting from the title itself, *The Last Labyrinth*. It is used as a symbol signifying all that Som, the protagonist, finds inexplicable in life. Time and again, it is emphasized that the last labyrinth is death. (37, 122). The Lal Haveli, the “sepulchral, sensual den” of Aflab Rai, is the starting-point where Som's obsession with the labyrinths of various kinds begins. The building “is built like a labyrinth, this haveli”, (36). it is “made like a labyrinth”, “lik a bhül-bulaiyan”, “in this hotch-potch way” (44), “it was a
maze that we were moving through. Perhaps, the entire haveli had been built as a maze”. (34-35). There are labyrinthine rooms and passages in it “There are rooms within rooms, corridors that only bring you back to where you started”. (36-37). It is located “amidst the labyrinths of Benaras” and there is “the idea of a labyrinth within the labyrinth of lanes that stretch westwards from the ghats of Benaras”. (29). “In Benaras, nothing was straightforward. One was always running a hurdles race”. The flight of steps to the squarish room of Gargi to which Aftab adds a wry smile, saying “This, too, is a labyrinth, my friend” (97) is as labyrinthine as the tobacco-stand house on the hills. There are different kinds of labyrinths that a man comes across in this life. There is the incomprehensibility of the world itself in which man is “like an ant threading through a maze, knocking about, against one wall, then another”, (53). Then, there is the labyrinth of the mind. The desire to know is a labyrinth: “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). Som is badly involved in the interstices of the mysterious labyrinth. A state comes when “The labyrinth... stretches to the Maya (one of Som’s residences), to Geeta (Som’s wife), to the very edges of this beach”, (157). At times, the reader, like Som, also feels caught in the labyrinth.
A symbolic explication of the novel is, of course, something remarkable and enlightening. Each character besides being a living creature is a symbol. The Lal Haveli is a symbol of life itself. Its last labyrinth symbolises death. Som's mother, his wife Gceta, and Gargi symbolise endurance, trust, religious faith. Gargi is a mysterious character who turns the purposelessness of existentialist philosophy into the mystery of life. In reply to Som's "I want, I want", not knowing what he wants, Gargi writes: "We are like children trying to reach up to a crack in the door to peep into a room". Anuradha, Som's "dark and terrible love" (157), is a symbol of the "elusive, unattainable" and undefinable in life, the life-spirit in woman and also of the spirit of sacrifice which is the highest fight of Hinduism. Krishna in many forms-Krishna on the cabinet shelf in the mother's room, Krishna whom Anuradha's mother believes to have married, Krishna whom Anuradha finds in a silver statue to Som, Krishna whom Anuradha finds in the purple mountains, and Krishna in the form of blue flame in the temple-is a symbol of the essence of Indian spiritual heritage that 'Brahma' (God, the Atman) is in every atom. The novel can be seen as a tale of two cities, Bombay and Benaras-Bombay symbolising Western, rational and industrial, whereas Benaras Oriental, occult and feudal. It is a story of a shrewd Bombay businessman trying to grab an inefficient plastics company owned by a feudal Benaras jagirdar together with his mistress and finally end in
losing the mistress who has been so near and dear to him. The Western world of reason is spelt out by Descrates, Kant, Darwin, Freud, Jung, Bombay and Leela Sabnis, and the Oriental spiritual world of faith by Anuradha, Gargi, Benaras and Krishna.

Som's dilemma springs from the double inheritance the Western and the Indian ethos. There is much of the subjective element in the character of Som. Both the protagonist and the novelist are made out of the dual forces— the Western and the Indian. Som, like Arun Joshi, is an Indian with a Western orientation, having his education abroad and inbibing in his thoughts the Western outlook—orderliness, neatness, and the value of being organised in life. Talking of his formative influences, Joshi reveals in his interview with Sujatha Mathai that he has been considerably influenced by Camus and other Western existentialist writers as well as Mahatma Gandhi and the Bhagwad-Gita. Som's dilemma, too, is born at the meeting-point of the Western and the Indian ethos. It takes full notice of the post-Nietzschean Western world which is Godless and the Indian life infused with the teachings of Lord Krishna in the Bhagwad Gita that he is everywhere in everything -

"Yachhapi sarva bhutanam beejam tadahama juna,
Na tadasti bina yatsyanmaya bhutam characharam"10.
That is, “Arjuna, I am even that which is the seed of all beings. For there is no creature, animate or inanimate, which exists without Me”. And again,

“Bcejham mam sarvabhutanam viddhi parth sanatanam”

That is, “Arjuna, know Me as the eternal seed of all beings”.

Godlessness is a common feature of many of Arun Joshi’s protagonists - Sindi Oberoi, Ratan Rathor, Himmat Singh and Sheikh, Som Bhaskar and his father. At the same time, the symbol of Krishna coming in many forms inside the novel is akin to the Indian concept that God is in every atom. The connecting link between the two worlds - Western and Indian - is the protagonist Som Bhaskar. The back-and-forth movements of Som’s mind, as it moves between the two worlds, are so artistically interwoven that he finds himself lost in the labyrinths. The incidence of “perhaps” and “probably” is so extensive in Som Bhaskar’s case that this “nagging, enervating doubts” (53) can be compared to those of the characters of Beckett and loncsco. He is “torn apart” (164) by his doubts and exemplifies the statement - “samshyatma vinashyati”, that is, “He (who) is possessed by doubt, is lost to the spiritual faith” of the Bhagawad-Gita. His situation is one of absurdity as loncsco defines: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcental roots, man is lost; all his actions become
senseless, absurd, useless". He develops "a new loathing for the squalid world" (46). He feels disgusted with the people and himself. He is aware of the lack of relevance in life that is full complications - "a labyrinth within the labyrinths" (29). He calls life "vanity of vanities" (32) which can be compared to "meaningless flights of stairs" (34) or "a fisherman's net" (37). He rushes about in search of happiness. He exclaims: "How happy I must be to have no problems in life" (98). But, much against his wishes, he finds life teeming with troubles and turmoils. The world remains to him "a mysterious world, as pretentious and meaningless as the holy bull of Benaras" (108). He tries his best to know the mystery of the world, the secrets of the universe. He himself says: "Nothing had interested me more than the secrets of the universe" (129).

Like his father, Som is vexed by the mere thought of death. He himself says: "There was nothing I loathed more than I loathed the sight of death" (15). The question often torments him: what is the point in running madly "in pursuit of little pleasures or little vendettas" (65) of life if death is to wind up all? Although his life he is haunted by the questions about life and death: "And always in various shades of coherence, the spoken or unspoken question, like a vulture, circled the corpse of my life: what lay in the last labyrinth?" (122). Previously in the
Lal Haveli when he asks Aftab: "And what is in the last labyrinth?", Aftab replies: "Why, death of course" (37). Som also would like to know "where one went from there" after this life: "Was this it, then? The terminus? The last of the labyrinth? Was it this that I had wanted all my life? Was this the answer to the relentless chant "I want, I want". Why was it so unsatisfying? Or, may be, the labyrinth hadn't ended. Something else lay ahead, something more fundamental than a miracle" (211). Till the end of his life such "strange mad thoughts" carom around his skull and he is not able to know whether they are "the harbinger, the pilot-escort, of melancholia? Of insanity? (or of) Faith?" (223). He is so caught in the dark labyrinths of life that he is unable to follow the light that is within him. He appears like a modern existentialist Hamlet who adds to him dilemma "to be or not to be" the additional horns of "to believe or not to believe". He appears, like a modern existentialist, Indian Gerontion, of course, not as old as the original one, who too, in lack of faith is "An old man in a draughty house / under a windy knob". Likewise, the existentialist weariness stays with Som till the end: "I am weary. Of so many fears: so much doubting. Of this dark earth and these empty heavens" (223). Like Abhimanyu, he is caught in the "chakravyuha" of life and death and finally gets lost forever. "In his quest, in his intent to unravel the cosmic mystery, Bhaskar is a modernized, secularized,
empiricized, sceptical Nachiketa who has been denied the faith and resolution of the Upanishadic model"\textsuperscript{12}.

Lacking faith and intuitive perception, Som cannot integrate within himself the metaphors and symbols of his experience. Largely, his alienation is caused by the tyranny of history and civilization. Like millions of sensitive / sophisticated men and women, he is a victim of bourgeois reality and monologic realism. His problem is that he cannot differentiate his ontological being from his social and historical persona—not that these are not real, but they are not final, definitive, self-authenticating. Of course, he has the potentialities / possibilities, both abstract and concrete, but he lacks the courage to authenticate himself\textsuperscript{13}. He yearns for 'a world of emotional fullness, a world of meaningful relatedness'\textsuperscript{14}, but his self-imprisoning possessiveness denies him entry into dialogical consciousness. Though his life's journey is full of mythic and archetypal forms and images, his materialism and rationalism leave him a stranger, an outsider to the world of psychic wholeness. Therefore, he retreats to the mundane world of obligations. The realms of spirituality and matter intersect, but in the end they fall apart.
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of obligations. The realms of spirituality and matter intersect, but in the end they fall apart.

Som fails, or perhaps only partially succeeds in his quest for meaning. But Som's failure is not Joshi's failure. The novel effectively dramatizes one man's struggle to authenticate himself, even though he negotiates most of the time in bad-faith. It enacts the spiritual dilemma of a modernized and empiricized sceptic and his inner despair and anxiety. Its mythic and metaphorical structure suggests a process of psychic growth, without attempting to provide any resolution. By juxtaposing reality and imagination, rationality and faith, the novel strikes a balance, however tenous, between actuality and myth, facticity and fiction. Joshi does not clearly privilege one discourse over the other; the world of reality is equally powerful, though less fulfilling and less enchanting. Anuradha, 'nobody's wife', the man-highflame, the magic lover, does constitute an extremely desirable goal, but Geeta, Som's wife, is not less worthy of attention, as the last act of the novel suggests, in which she offers him warmth, loyalty and understanding. Her undiminishing and unquestioning trust may restore peace to Som's harried life.
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[All references to the novel are to this edition giving the abbreviation L.L.]


3. As Quoted in R.K. Dhawan, The Novels of Arun Joshi (New Delhi: prestige, 1992) P.33

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5. Hari Mohan Prasad, Arun Joshi (New Delhi; Arnold Heineman, 1985) P. 106


8. Hari Mohan Prasad, Arun Joshi (New Delhi, Arnold Heinemann, 1985) P. 89

10. The Bhagavad Gita, Chapter IX, verse 39, op.cit, P.224.

11. Ibid., Chapter VII, verse 10, op.cit., P.163.

