



## Symbolic Presentation of Inner Crisis in Arun Joshi's The Last Labyrinth and the Foreigner

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Arun Joshi, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, all made use of symbols, images, metaphors and myths in their novels. Arun Joshi uses symbols to peep into the thoughts and emotions of his characters. The use of symbols and myths impart a distinct quality to his novels. Northrop Fry wrote,

“writers are interested in myths and symbols for the same reason that painters are interested in still life arrangements, because they illustrate essential principles of story telling”<sup>1</sup>

Joshi too has a similar view.

Arun Joshi takes a psychological insight into the human soul, into its urges and aspirations. In *The Last Labyrinth*, he probes the Labyrinths of the soul which have become metaphors of Life and Death. He delves deep into the human psyche and narrates the tension resulting from clashes of the inner self. After winning the Sahitya Akademy Award, Arun Joshi admitted in an interview that for him, the meaning of life, “Lies in the dark hopeless mazes where you may get irretrievably lost or discover the shining secret at the core of life.”<sup>2</sup>

In *The Last Labyrinth*, Joshi makes use of symbols and myths in order to express the state of mind of the chief protagonist, Som Bhaskar. The symbol of Labyrinth runs throughout the novel often through the use of words like void and darkness. Death itself is a Labyrinth but so is life. Som is in search of the realities and mysteries of love, life and death:

“What is it then? The Terminus? The Last of the Labyrinth... What is 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 lay ahead, something more fundamental than a miracle.”<sup>3</sup>

Som Bhaskar is a typical upper-class Indian, unable to comprehend his own self. He is a successful, wealthy industrialist but finds that money is nothing but dirt. He is married to Geeta and has two children. He has every material possession but there is a “terrible sense of emptiness”. He is discontented, ‘worn-out’, ‘weary’ and incapable of spontaneous feeling. He had no idea what he wanted but wanted,

“I want, I want, If only I knew what one wanted or may be, to know 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.”<sup>4</sup>

Life has become empty and hollow, “It is the voids of the world, more than its objects, that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without... voids of caves and voids of the sky...”<sup>5</sup>

His sense of dissatisfaction makes him possessive, of business and a woman. He talks about his problem to his friend and physician,

“... for many years 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.”<sup>6</sup>

In his search for peace and contentment, he goes from one woman to another, one business to another but felt depressed and dejected. Like the Lanes of Benaras, his life is also a blind alley\_ incomprehensible. Joshi has portrayed the conflicts of the mind. There was nothing that could navigate him through the Labyrinths of life, his inner-self, his mind. He loves his wife, Geeta but fails to have an emotional relation with her perhaps it is his western education that has made him so materialistic. The imagery of Labyrinth runs through the entire novel. The void in Som's mind is the psychological Labyrinth and his inability to comprehend the depth of spirituality is his spiritual Labyrinth. Metaphorically speaking, life itself is a complicated Labyrinth and the hero is puzzled as he has no way to find his path out of this puzzle. Traditional Indian culture and values could have come to his rescue. Western values do not bring peace and calm of mind. He is in search of his own self.

Som is attracted by Anuradha. He is afraid of death and the fear of the last labyrinth haunts him. When Anuradha leaves him, he becomes apprehensive of everything—elevators, bridges, cars, breeze, electric-switches and canned food. Som is now a traveller in search of 'Self' and 'Reality'. He who did not have any faith in religion and spirituality now remarks,

“There was nothing simple about Krishna. Had it been so, He would not have survived for ten thousand years. He would have died along with the gods of the Pharaohs, the Sumerians... Krishna was about as simple as the Labyrinths of Aftab's Haveli.”<sup>7</sup>

Gradually Som understands that it is faith and faith alone that can liberate one from the fear of death. He has a miraculous recovery from a near fatal heart attack. When Anuradha vanishes into Krishna, on the night of Janmashtami, Som is left alone and cries and appeals to Anuradha and prays for Gods forgiveness through her:

“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 doubling of this dark earth and these empty heavens. Plead for me, Anuradha. He will listen to you.”<sup>8</sup>

Som's doubts and dilemmas remain unsolved. He is unable to find his way out of the complicated Labyrinths of life and the mystery of death. The novel is about the struggle of man to find his self and solve the question of life and death. It is a psychological study of the soul. Som Bhaskar is divided between two worlds unable to accept or reject any of them. His reason, logic and belief in science do not solve the problems faced by him. He is at war with himself. In his case, it is not a crisis of emotion or ethics, it is a crisis of his inner self which lies deep in his consciousness. Arun Joshi is pre occupied with the individual and his inner sensibility\_the chaos\_the turbulence inside the mind. The writer explores the interior self of the protagonist and the hidden contours of the human psyche. The emphasis is on the inner crisis of the individual and their awareness of the futility of existence.

Joshi's novels are attempts to discover the meaning of life. His heroes are lonely and misfits in the world in which they live and face meaninglessness of life. He loved India not only because he

belonged to it but also because of its spirituality. In an interview by Pier Paolo Picicecco, Arun Joshi said,

“...I certainly have some affinities with this country, I have found it lately. One is the affinity of the spiritual kind and then there is the affinity of the sensual kind and then there are others, too... India still remains very unique. You know, historically, India has always been very inner-directed and never outer-directed like many other countries. Inner-direction is also one thing I have a lot of affinities with.”<sup>9</sup>

Joshi believed that all Indian names were meaningful\_Bhaskar means “sun” and Som means “nectar”. Life and Death are the central motif in his novels and perhaps also in his life. Joshi came to believe in the Hindu philosophy of Karma and the immortality of the soul and its birth and re-birth. He confessed,

“There is a special Indian view-point which I have known all my life. Recently, I came to feel that this must be correct, but I still did not know it when I wrote *The Last Labyrinth*. Let me say that my soul used to anticipate things that came on the paper was before I myself had reached that point. Death was just like a... a big end of things, but still very meaningless to me after so much suffering, so much this and so much that.”<sup>10</sup>

The quest of “Reality”, a mythical adventure finds expression in *The Last Labyrinth*. An intellectual writer, Arun Joshi addresses himself to the very essence of being in a world that is confronted with spiritual vacuum and moral bankruptcy. He is concerned with the issue of human existence in a world bereft of sustaining values, moral courage and warm, genuine human concerns. Most of his novels are based on issues of existential anguish, alienation and dispossession. They deal with emotional traumas of introverts suffering from loneliness and alienation in family and society. Arun Joshi is concerned with the search for the core of life which he has tried to convey through the various symbols. The “Lal Haveli”, “Benaras”, “Bombay”, and especially the complex, mysterious architecture of the “haveli” becomes a symbol of the confused mind of SomBhaskar. It is a feudal structure “built like a Labyrinth.”:

“The place was bigger than its narrow façade would have led one to believe much bigger. It must have been built over a long period. A room here. A verandah there. You could spot the idiosyncrasies of the different builders... A variety of balconies and cornices and patios. Doors of all shapes and colour, some carved, others painted in ornate, fading enamel. There were rooms, bright and airy as a gazebo...”<sup>11</sup>

Freedom, detachment, loneliness, selfishness are the important themes he deals with in his novels. Arun Joshi believed that these are not different from one another but actually one:

“They are actually one. I guess freedom (or Liberty, if you like) which is both political and spiritual. I have not much dealt with. But the inner Liberation without detachment is not possible and selfishness is always stopping you from getting liberated. Loneliness is the state where you become aware that you are not liberated and you also do not know how to get liberated. This is the loneliness stage in a man’s life.”<sup>12</sup>

All Joshi’s characters come across this stage, Life, soul, death and divinity are fundamental human preoccupations, His heroes suffer from cultural and spiritual degeneration. *The Last Labyrinth* is a

symbol of modern Indians hanging between faith and reason, tradition and modernity, native and western ideas. SomBhaskar depicts the fate of a man who has given up all hope and finds no meaning in his identity, life and survival itself. The novelist suggests that devoid of faith, man is fragile and hollow.

In Arun Joshi other novel, *The Foreigner*, Sindi faces the same predicament. In fact the issues of rootlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation and self estrangement are universal and common to entire mankind Sindi runs away from his duties and then this is how he feels:

“That was the first time I came face to face with pain. Until then I had heard and read about it, but now it was real and it seemed to permeate everything, like the smell of death in an epidemic. All that I had thought was pleasurable and ended in pain and after all this I was as far from finding the purpose of my life as I had been to start with... I spent a whole year wondering through the maze of my existence looking for an answer.”<sup>13</sup>

Sindi was in search of meaning of life:

“I climbed a hill and sat down on a weathered stone. The sun had just risen and the valley seemed strangely ethereal in the clear light. Suddenly, I felt a great lightening, as if someones had lifted a burden from my chest and it all came through in a flash... Birth and death are real. They are the constants. All else is variable... According to the Hindu mystics there is a reality beyond all this. But I don't know. I would like to know some day.”<sup>14</sup>

Sindi reviews his life when in India

“I took a general stock of myself, In many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without its lessons. And the future? In an ultimate sense, I knew, it would be as meaningless as the past. But, in a narrower sense, there would be perhaps useful tasks to be done; perhaps if I were lucky, even a chance to redeem the past.”<sup>15</sup>

In *The Foreigner* Joshi apparently seems to be dealing with a different theme but a deep analysis shows that in most of his novels he is concerned with the issues of Life, Death and Self realization—issues that are relevant to mankind itself.

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