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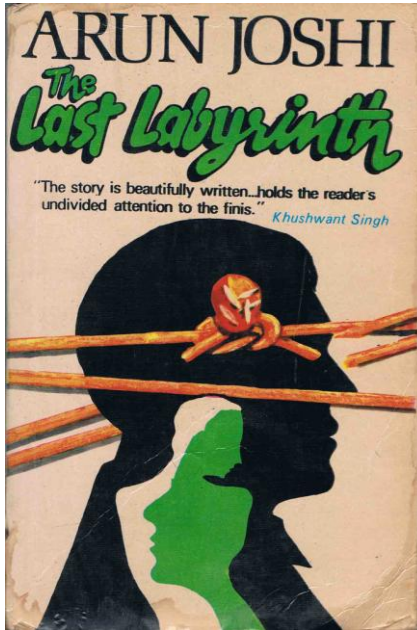
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## The Narrative Construct of Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

P. Bala Shanmuga Devi, Ph.D.



Reality Blended with Artistic Manoeuver

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Arun Joshi portrays reality blended with a judicious artistic manoeuvre beyond the mere phenomenal world, but of actual experience. He gives a beautiful shape to his theme hidden in the actuality of his life in traditional social construct and the modern metro livelihood. His genius in depicting the world of human struggle in the novel *The Last Labyrinth* in a varied, spectacular motley mode is simply superb.

The acute trying situations in human life craving for solutions at any cost is described in a precise style interspersed with hints of Indian mythology such as age-old customs, faith, dreams, oracles, cycle of life and death, in a bewitching style.

### ***The Last Labyrinth* – The Flashbacks**

The story is told in a series of flash backs with a clever ordering of past events, throwing together the past and the present, the real and the remembered, the world of imagination and the reality to maximize the suspense, “a poetic exploration of the past with a naturalistic sense of the presence – corporal, narcissistic, rebellious, and despairing” (Mohan *The Fiction of Joshi* 28).

Joshi’s satire and irony aiming at economic disparity, moral lapses, corruption, despotism of the Government as well by the trading community engulfed in hoarding and tax evading are quite admirable. Flashbacks are accompanied by progressive events running simultaneously. This structural layout is surely a technical ingenuity and Joshi’s special gift as a novelist. The flow of the narrative more than the theme of alienation keeps up our undivided interest. The monotonous tedium of introspection and inner life receives kaleidoscopic flavour through his deft handling. The restrained narrative design and the techniques of suggestiveness are simply overwhelming with parallelisms, juxtaposition and overlapping of dialogue sequences.

### **The Narrative Structure**

The narrative structure in *The Last Labyrinth*, allows the real conflict to be projected in a dramatized form providing both a ritual enactment and a magical relief, for the society in question. Day to day activities of all types of human beings is imprinted on a wide canvas of fiction with adept use of allegoric mode and legends. A spectroscopic effect is lent by the pen of Joshi, imparting to the tales a universal and eternal significance. A number of literary devices are employed deliberately to highlight his cause.

### **More an Indian Novel**

Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth* is more Indian, than the other novels and more rich, deep and unfathomable. Suitably the recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, it is the protagonist Som Bhaskar’s search not alone for money but for the joy of life. It is an abstract search and hence the target as well the means of achieving it is traversing through a complex maze. He suffers from spiritual hollowness for he had become a

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spokesperson for Westernized Indians, who have lost their spiritual roots. It is the failure of science and reason, which Som Bhaskar suffers from. His intellectual rationalism leads him nowhere. Neither could his wife Geetha, whom he claims to be a special person, nor Leela Sabnis nor Anuradha balm his tattered soul. Life to him is dark and the antiquity, which Anuradha and the haveli represent, lures him and seems to provide comfort, whatsoever.

### **Spiritual Clamour and the Suffering of Rational Believers**

Som Bhaskars are a common sight in the postcolonial arena as well as in the postmodern trend. In this novel, spiritual clamour evokes deep feelings and stirs the remotest part of one's psyche. Pathos arises from the fact that Som is in want of something but is unable to identify what it is. A man of rich caliber, who knows how to make things happen and a person who, if required can push himself to any extent finds this vacuum of spirit exasperating. The novel itself is based on the exasperation something which the postcolonial man commonly faces.

Hence, *The Last Labyrinth* is the sufferings of a rationalist, a believer in intelligence and expediency, which prevent him from sublimating his desires from the animalistic instinct to the spiritual, for he is not ready to surrender completely to a transcendental wisdom propitiated by seers of yesteryears.

### **Image and Imagination**

In common usage, imagination does not merit much value. However, as soon as it is associated with any form of art, it becomes associated with the highest value. Joshi has a sparkling imagination, which enables him to convey to the reader the various forms of nature, incidents of life and energies of passion. Metaphors and similes add boundless charm and rhetoric to a literary work.

A. Ramakrishna Rao in *The Literary Endeavour* states that, "The image of 'indefatigable surgeon', reminding us of Eliot's "Wounded Surgeon", concretises the process" (12) of metamorphosis. Som feels "like a hare chased by unseen hounds" (*Labyrinth* 63) and "God is like having a third king in a game of chess" (*Labyrinth* 166). Ramakrishna Rao further adds that in "Joshi's *oeuvre* is the subtle juxtaposition of "void" and "labyrinth" as two modes of making sense of life...Labyrinth is a total explanation. Wastelands and voids are, at best, only half truths" (16-17).

### **Exploration of Indian Mind**

*The Last Labyrinth* is unmistakably a novel about an Indian mind explored by another Indian. Hedonism, cynicism, loss of faith, confusion of values, which are very typical of the upper crust Indian society, finds a say in the novel. The search for the core of life is obviously revealed through symbols like labyrinth, haveli and so on: "The word 'labyrinth' and its analogues like 'maze' and 'impasse' recur in all of Joshi's novels. But

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it is only in *The Last Labyrinth* that the word comes to acquire “a thematic resonance and a metaphoric inclusiveness. It is associated with the protagonist’s attempt to unravel the mysteries of life, love, death, and divinity...” (Ghosh 121).

### **Labyrinths and Mazes**

To begin with, the labyrinth in Lal Haveli is the starting point of Som Bhaskar’s awareness about labyrinths and mazes. The word acquires a complexity and a multiplicity of meanings and functions. The following excerpt from the text throws light on many such mysteries:

“My ancestors baffled their enemies this way. There are rooms within rooms, corridors that only bring you back to where you started....There are rooms where you could lock a man up and he would never be found. No one would hear his cry.”

“And, what is in the last labyrinth?”....

“Why, death, of course.”

I looked at him puzzled. (*Last Labyrinth* 36 -37)

The ‘I’ character serves its purpose well, bringing out the protagonist’s psychical contact with society and environment that induce a disturbed psychological development which finally enable him to solve his turmoil of alienation. The structure of the novel is extremely complicated and labyrinthine. It has a very intricate technique of narration with introspection and flashbacks interspersed here and there. On one level, it is the story of a businessman trying to grab all that he can set his hands on, who tries to take away the plastic manufacturing company of the Benaras *Zamindar* Aftab and his female accomplice Anuradha also.

### **Conflict of Twin Culture**

On another level, it is the story of the deep-rooted yearnings of love, spiritual mortification and gratification and the pathetic narration of a lost soul, groping to grasp the meaning of life and death. The conflict of twin culture is obvious in this novel also. He is a product of Indian and western culture on one hand and the son of a very religious and pious mother and a scientist cum spiritualist father who is in search of the First Cause until his death.

The strain generated out of such upbringing is obvious. The real pathos lies in the fact that he does not know what he wants. The desire to know is itself the ‘labyrinth’. He says, “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” (*Last Labyrinth* 53).

This uncertainty, this ultimate existential unknowable, is the perennial problem he faces. But, as is typical of all Joshian protagonists Som Bhaskar also finds the solution to his problem. S. Radhakrishnan says that this is because, “in human nature itself there is a polarity, there is a dichotomy” (*Towards a New World* 141).

Anuradha has a very powerful influence on Som but towards the end, her characterization seems to be a bit shadowy. She stands as a concept of sacrifice, a supreme personification of *Shakti*. Gargi, the deaf-mute priestess is also a deliberate and delicate symbolic portrayal, as symbolic as the labyrinth.

### **The Dreams**

Dreams are also used with inherent implications. They act as reflective insiders, which voices his desires and yearnings crying for fulfillment. Each dream shows him as a distorted and deformed person. The language of the dreams becomes the language of the inner Som and has a pictorial quality, hallucinatory, disconnected and surrealistic mood. Various unrelated images are juxtaposed. People who are in no way connected to Som appear in the dreams, which heighten the pathos experienced. Freud questions: “how can we know of the existence of the unknowable? We know of it, Freud contends, in three ways: through dream; through Para praxes, principally slips of the tongue; and through the technique of analysis and its main tool, free association” (Fowler 193). Joshi has applied this aptly in the novel.

### **Krishna, Krishna and the Simple Lexis**

The recurrent mention of Krishna is also a symbol. Krishna is called *sampoorna purush*, the complete man. *The Upanishads* define wholeness as “From wholeness emerges wholeness and if you take away wholeness from wholeness, wholeness still remains!” (Osho *The Krishna: The Man and his Philosophy* 6). The concept of wholeness is what the quest is about and Som’s incessant futile search targeted at.

The simple lexis is an indication of simple style. The sentences are short and simple with obvious syntactic simplicity. The greatness of Joshi’s narration lies in his description of Lal Haveli, the central motif of the novel which is picturised vividly. The description of the labyrinthine building is done as the protagonist sees it and not in architectural precision.

This is also the pattern of narration which Joshi follows in all his novels wherein incidents of importance appear in order of priority. Joshi’s birth place Benares “was the famous city that had been famous before Rome was known or Cyrus had built the Persian empire; whose craftsmen had provided silks for king Solomon’s palaces and gold for his temples.” (*Last Labyrinth*, 34) In the description of Benares, Joshi’s authorial silence has relented a bit to show the deep rooted native pride of Joshi over the ancient glorious Benares by referring to its connection with the Biblical wise king Solomon.

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## The Realistic Expressionism

Yet in his realistic mood of expressionism, the pathetic other side of Benares is also made bare. The depravity and squalor prevalent in almost all the downtrodden slum dwellers who are yet religion-oriented in many parts of India vividly gets revealed by Joshi. In the alley of Benares, where one of the most venerated god women Gargi resides, one finds, “enormous hoardings one advertising a movie, the other aphrodisiacs. Around them sprouted other hoardings, small and big, offering bulbs, hotels, saris, typing schools, sweet shops, hair oils, surrounding the hoardings like a fisherman’s net, lay a maze of narrow lanes. The lanes were crowded with people and with holy bulls.” (*Last Labyrinth*, 37).

These few lines bring out a complete picture of Benares, with all its antiquity, sensuality, spiritual ambience abiding side by side with the avocations of common folks engaged in fishing as their main source of livelihood and running petty shops on the pavements, during Joshi’s contemporary period and before. Just juxtaposed with the squalor of Benares stands Bombay’s business tycoons living in concrete jungles involved in blunt bracing of give and take of commerce.

## The Perplexity of the Elite

The perplexity felt as a whole by the elite as well as the men belonging to the lowest rungs of the ladder of communities residing in India and abroad in their search for one’s true identity, in the world, quite characteristic of the period in which Joshi happens to live in, is summarised by Som’s well-learned yet melancholic father, through a verse in Rig Veda whose indecisive answer of subtle nature still confuses the mind of rational outlook.

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. Or, perhaps, He knows not.”(*Last Labyrinth*, 155).

Thus *The Last Labyrinth* is undoubtedly a masterpiece wherein the authorial voice and the structure are as enticing as the theme and the title.

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