

Subject of Self-Identity in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

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Abstract

Arun Joshi an outstanding Indian English novelist delves deep into the crises of the contemporary Indian life and establishes the supreme significance of humanistic values in the life of modern man who is under the vicious impact of westernisation and modernisation. The reality which is hidden in one's real life, is discovered by him. He creates a world for his characters that who are confronted by the true self. Also, man is encountered by their existence which is a riddle to him. He presents the inner life of his protagonists so skillfully that it becomes universal. The protagonist comes under various pressures during the process of living. Sometimes, this pressure is exerted by the society. At other times, this pressure is psychological, political, cultural, and spiritual. This paper examines how Som Bhaskar the protagonist, suffers the reasons for his suffering and how far his quest for his lost self becomes successful.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth*, Westernisation, Modernisation, Innate nature, Quest for self.

Generally, Man is unsuccessful to be aware of the purpose behind his life. He is weak to perceive the pertinence of his existence in a world which is hostile. The contemporary man personalizes himself in searching his self in a mess which is always tragic. The problem of meaninglessness is so pervasive that it threatens to corrode every sphere of human life. This search keeps on going however; there are achievements in technology and trailblazing science. He is subject to shock to understand the fact that he is no longer to be the master to decide his destiny. He is also shocked to find the forces that menace his life, the joys and the hopes in it.

Arun Joshi, a novelist of human predicament, expresses his existential vision that becomes clearer and he seems to insist upon the realisation of the eternal self that leads to emancipation from all the anguishes of life. His *The Last Labyrinth* is more Indian than the other novels and is deep and unfathomable. It is Som Bhaskar's search which is not only for money but also 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 has become a spokesperson for westernised 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. Life to him is dark and the antiquity.

Som Bhaskar, a millionaire industrialist, he has an eternal longing to possess anything he desires. He understands that he is paralyzed in the fundamental hence that cannot be controlled by him to foresee things. Some considers the world as a labyrinth and is groping through reality in order to beget the material and sensual pleasures, the business shares of Aftab Rai and even his concubine Anuradha. Som's failure to control his weaknesses and flaws ditches him into agony and anxiety. The internal and external conflict has been presented through Joshi's earlier artistic flair of narrator-protagonist technique in first person narrative point of view.

Additionally, he is an obsessive and highly sensitive individual; he has his grappling with the feeling of emptiness and void at the core of his being. He is an ambitious son of a prosperous industrialist. In his pursuit of realizing his ambition, his efforts are futile. He even rushes to the arms of innumerable women but every time he experiences just void. He becomes mentally shattered and physically exhausted with dreams and insomnia. As a result of his anxiety to acquire more and more, he maneuvers a sort of alienation and restlessness and even loses faith in God, in friendship, in marriage and even in fatherhood.

Psychologically, Som is fissured psychologically because he is completely immersed in the labyrinth of life which leads him through innumerable sufferings. The reason for the disorder in psyche, from another point of view, is that the defined desire in him to possess everything chases him relentless. A mysterious voice, which always hunts him, is audible only to him. To know the reason void in his psyche, Som makes many attempts that are futile. He feels void, loneliness and is lost in the labyrinth of thoughts. He is at a loss to know how to fill this emptiness. This void leaves him with insomnia and he can do nothing about it at the conscious level.

Notably, Som has made several unsuccessful attempts to find out the reason for the void in his psyche. He, with the spirit of a business tycoon and the guidance of the dictum 'Survival of the fittest,' tries name and fame and also wealth. Money has added to his misery. Even tranquilizers and sleeping drugs could not afford to soothe him, instead the voids return with a relentless ferocity. He has gained melancholia from his father. Moreover, his grandfather is a womaniser and booser. It is this lack of stability that has created dilemma in the psyche of Som Bhaskar.

Besides, his mother is a religious woman who believed in God and divine healing. Science and religion created a strain in his psyche. Som is a representative of those modern men who may have gained the whole world but have lost their souls, their spiritual and cultural

moorings. His conflicting self, with its endless desire to possess, is resolved through his association with Anuradha, Gargi and Geeta. Anuradha showers love and sympathy on him and miraculously saves him from his ailment. Gargi makes him realize the meaninglessness of wordly possessions. Geeta, his patient and tolerant wife, saves him from the sin of suicide and rouses him from ignorance. This trio of women in their own way helps Som to move on the path to faith. This faith can be attained only after passing through a painful ordeal and overcoming the impasse of intellectual doubt through knowledge of human suffering and through spiritual commitment.

However, Som Bhaskar narrates in a flashback how he was confused in understanding the difference between 'being' and 'having' and this has made his life a void which later on resulted in his endless pursuit of mystical 'wanting' which further increased his fornications and turned him into a womanizer. Thus, he narrates his confession. Therefore, he is very curious to know the secret by his objective approach which does not solve his dilemma but aggravates instead and he continues to suffer in the mystic hollow of the empty and void world. He thinks:

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. (48)

Moreover, Som's suffering is more aggravated when he begins his education in two cultures. Born in India and brought up under a religious mother, he imbibes religious faith and spiritual learning. During his study abroad, he comes into contact with the western way of thinking. His confidence in direct reason, wisdom in practical life and attitude related to science go sharp thereupon. When his father comes back to India, they all are strengthened by the help of his father. Thus, he possesses a baffled personality devoid of faith and rest in mind. His life becomes a rudderless boat being tossed on turbulent waves 'horrified by "going forward and backward and sideways of the mind (48)".

In order to settle himself and in search of the final answers to his wanting wishes, he turns in a compulsive fornicator and runs to different women to satisfy himself. It is to be experienced by a direct intuition and by wisdom that only suffering can give. Man is often alone and helpless in this planet. In the sparkling moments of life, the troubled mind longs for such a loving heart that may himself appears from somewhere to bestow love upon him, sooth him and support him. In the most difficult situations of life, if the easiest and most spontaneous imagination comes to the mind, it will certainly be none, but the omnipresent and omnipotent

God, the last hope, support and strength. Even if it is a deception, it is acceptable. The over rational attitude like Som is only a foolish attempt. Aftab tells Som:

That is what you think. 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... You are empty of understanding (200)

As it happens, Som is empty of understanding because reason and faith are the two different aspects of the same coin. The intellect is operated by our logical mind and faith arises from the innermost reality of our heart. Furthermore, these two parts have been created by the same creator whether we designate Him as God or Nature. Reason is an acute genre of intellect. Its distinguished functioning can be used in understanding only those objects which may involve our sensory organs. To understand that subject which is beyond our senses, the rational interpretation cannot help us; however, it may protect us to avoid superstitions so that the individual may realize the true nature of God.

Joshi seems to support a religious scientific attitude towards life to disentangle the puzzle of existential problems and come out of the maze of life. The realisation of God needs surrender; sacrifice and strong will to change one's mind and accept the reality. Introspection itself is not enough unless there is strength in mind to fiercely alter one's mind, thinking and the existential conditions. Som's gradual development to realize this fact of life becomes the substance of the novel. The labyrinth of the life need trust, faith and prayer, done open heartedly, to get settled. Som's problem is that he is constantly longing for satisfaction, but he fails to identify that it is spiritual rather than the material phenomena that he is searching for. Changing of relationships and pursuit of different women can satisfy only the hunger of the body, never the spirit.

Thus, in this way, what comes out from the forgoing analysis is that lack of faith results in doubt which further characterizes into rejection of self-reliance and lack of inner strength. Som has all these caricatures one by one. He cannot take any decision despite his realization that one has to find the way alone. To put it in a nutshell, Joshi reveals that this world is a labyrinth, an intricate web where man has to carve his way out for himself. He through this story, beautifully states that life is so full of distractions like lust, greed, wrath and pride which serve as different layers of a labyrinth that man is most likely to get deviated from the right path of redemption.

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