



Transcending Spiritual Crisis in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

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Abstract

The present research paper focuses on the spiritual journey actualised by the protagonist Som Bhaskar in Arun Joshi's novel *The Last Labyrinth* (1981). Its main objective is to explore the why and the how of the protagonist's spiritual attainment. Perturbed by the hollowness of the society, the inner chaos and the uncertainty of life, and fretted by the insubstantial hunger and spiritual alienation, Bhaskar experiences a profound discomfort and disconnectedness from both the external world and his inner self, and therefore, he is in constant search for the meaning of life in this materialist world. He is the representative of the modern men, signifying the turbulence and trauma in life. Torn between illusion and reality, life and death, luxury and peace, he is seeking the purpose of living. Although he is a millionaire and great businessman, he searches for something that will transcend him from all the troubles and turmoil of life. He wants to taste the ambrosia of life. And it is this urge of his that makes him a 'seeker', who navigates through his labyrinthine journeys, and accosts profound questions about existence, selfhood and the existence of God. Living in the world and maintaining all sorts of strained personal and professional relations, and meeting societal expectations, Bhaskar oscillates between hopes and despair, between logic and faith, between identity and alienation, and finally he, through ontological explorations, transcends his spiritual crises and feels ultimate unity with Brahman. Peace and serenity pervade and permeate all around him, transporting him to



the divine ecstasy. He achieves his spiritual equilibrium through intense self-examination. The research is done through the application of qualitative research method, analysing the dialogues, narratives and anecdotes in the text.

Keywords: Alienation, Existence, Labyrinth, Self-realization, Spiritual Crisis

Introduction

Arun Joshi is one of the most influential intellectual novelists of India. He is best known for the in-depth treatment of metaphysics, deep psychological insights, exploration of existential dilemmas, and the complexities of human mind in his novels. Although he is often collated with the existentialist philosophers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre in the manner of foregrounding the theme of existentialism, he is unlike from them in the sense that his novels are entrenched with Indian sense and sensibility. He is more akin to Raja Rao in the treatment of the theme of metaphysics, but at the same time, he differs from Rao in the way he offers a solution to the existential and spiritual crisis. Joshi's protagonists affirm life and live in the world of business, performing *karma* (actions), whereas Rao's protagonists often renounce the world they live in. Bhatnagar (1986) aptly writes, "Joshi is against the outworn mode and style of detachment and renunciation so labouriously built up by the Raja Rao metaphysics and its followers" (p. 49). In other words, Joshi's protagonists attain the unattainable living in the world of blood and flesh, without abandoning action. Though his heroes rise above material attachments, they no longer repudiate and renounce the material world. Rather, they accept and embrace the world around them, and eventually learn to live in harmony and love without attachment.

The *Sahitya Akademi Award* (1982) winning novel *The Last Labyrinth* is about Som Bhaskar, a twenty five year young millionaire industrialist, who grapples with his desires, materialism, and quest for the understanding of the self by transcending the dualities of life. Despite the phenomenal financial progress and impressive social status, he feels uprooted from his own self, alienated from the cosmic harmony, and lost in the labyrinth of life. Disquieted by the pernicious quandary of his protagonist, the novelist comes to the realisation that the only way to de-alienate human beings from the cosmic harmony is to transcend spiritual crises by means of following and celebrating the *Upanishadic* and *Advaitic sutras* (principles).

Methods

This research paper employs qualitative research method, and hence, the researcher heavily draws upon discursive approach and the textual analysis of the primary source to identify the themes related to spiritual crisis and existential dilemmas. The secondary sources like scholarly research articles on the text and book reviews are used to support the thesis. The principles evinced in *The Gita*, *The Upanishads*, and the *Advaita* are also embedded in the discussion section as a research tool to examine and unearth how Som Bhaskar's temporal journey ultimately takes him to spiritual attainment, freeing him from all sorts of existential dilemmas in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*.



Discussion

The *labyrinth* as a Metaphor

The title of the novel bears a metaphysical overtone and symbolic connotation as well as spiritual dimension. The labyrinth appears as a powerful symbol of the chaos, confusion, and complexities of human life and psyche. It stands for the complex path of self discovery and the mirage that entrap individuals. In its literal sense, "A labyrinth is a structure compounded to confuse men; its architecture, rich in symmetries, is subordinated to that end" (Borges, 1964, p. 106). Similarly, Leach (1984) defines the labyrinth as "the complex prison built by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete to contain the Minotaur. The name probably is derived from *labrys*, the sacred double axe of the Cretans, and there was the temple of bull cult in Crete. So complicated was the labyrinth that none could escape once it was entered. The name was applied ... to all kinds of mazes" (p. 598). Here, the term 'labyrinth' has been used in its literal sense to describe the twists and turns of a structure, and in its symbolic sense to suggest the internal conflicts and dilemmas faced by the protagonist. Therefore, labyrinth serves as a strong metaphor to translate the inner turmoil of Bhaskar. Guru Prasad Thakur (1986) observes that "In the present novel, the word *labyrinth* comes to acquire a thematic resonance, a metaphoric inclusiveness" (p. 162). Arun Joshi employs the term very aptly and metaphysically. T. J. Abraham (1999) writes that, "The term *labyrinth* is a favourite and recurrent metaphor for the inscrutable self in Arun Joshi....In *The Last Labyrinth*, apart from extensive use of the word, the whole thematic corpus and thrust are cast in a labyrinthine imagery" (p. 20). The *labyrinth* in consideration resembles to the *chakravyuha* or *padmavyuha*, a kind of military formation having multiple defensive walls, depicted in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. As it was difficult to infiltrate the *chakravyuha*, so is it difficult for a man to come out of the intervening fantasies of one's soul.

The physical structure and the striking size of Aftab Rai's *Lal Haveli* is a prison-like earthly labyrinth, where Bhaskar seems to be entrapped. When Bhaskar enters into the *haveli*, it appears to him mazed and labyrinthine. Even to Aftab, the *haveli* is quite mysterious. Aftab says that, "There are things about such houses that you discover only with time" (p. 33). He further adds, "The *haveli* was built like a labyrinth because 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" (pp. 36-37). Bhaskar is in a situation where every corner reveals yet another deception waits for him. He feels lost in the *haveli* and is unable to escape from there. He meets Aftab and Anuradha in the maroon Blue Room where he sees his own image in the portraits on the wall. He says, "Turning a corner I was startled by an apparition. Careworn, holding a cigarette in one hand, it looked as though for many centuries it had lived in that bleak house. I stared breathless, realizing suddenly, that I was staring at my own image" (p. 32). Bhaskar, like the portraits, is trapped in the grip of *avidya* (ignorance) from which he wants to come out. He is deeply sucked in the labyrinth of life, love, intrigue, and mystery. V. Rangan (1991) asserts that "Aftab Rai's *Lal Haveli* is the objective correlative for the infernal world" (p. 113).



The labyrinth under the analysis also stands for the sexual orientation of Bhaskar towards Anuradha, the unwed wife of Aftab. She is charming and fascinating. She is like a primordial power. Although Bhaskar is married to Geeta, a woman of his own choice, and has children of his own, he is drawn to Anuradha. Her figure revives his latent passion. He considers sex as a mystery, and therefore, he wants to know what is in the last sexual labyrinth. Sublimated sex leads to liberation. Bhasker slowly recognises the existence of God. O. P. Mathur (1990) states that "*The Last Labyrinth* seems to depict the vague but unmistakably reaching out for faith and understanding by a man lost in the labyrinth of desires and the vague simmering of his discontent with this type of life" (p. 142). Bhaskara's realisation of Truth reminds us of Advaitic principle that "The real is free from self-contradiction and is present at all times" (Radhakrishnan, 1971, p. 562). In the same vein of criticism, Nishant Kumar (2023) writes:

The term 'Labyrinth' in the title of the novel refers to Joshi's mindset, which is an equivalent change like 'maze,' 'impasse,' 'tangle,' 'bhulbhulaiyan', and 'entanglement' in which Som Bhaskar entangles in search of his identity and meaning of life. The perplexing question of knowing the self always haunts him, which is why he nowhere gets satisfaction. Joshi's depiction of two cities: Mumbai and Benares, has a symbolic look that Joshi manifests in the novel. His heroes are trapped or deadlocked only due to the ignorance and illusion of life; therefore, their quest to know the meaning of life and self-knowledge always remain problematic. (p. 150)

Hence, the metaphor of labyrinth underscores the *Advaitic* concept of *Maya*, the illusion that obscures the true nature of reality. The labyrinth functions as a catalyst for Bhaskar's spiritual transformation. As he maneuvers through the labyrinth, he experiences hopes and despairs, obstacles and obstructions, and trials and tribulations that ultimately prepare him understand himself and the world in a deeper way. He undergoes profound spiritual transformation that brings ecstasy in his life.

Spiritual Crisis and Liberation

The novel commences depicting its protagonist Som Bhaskar as a spiritually alienated and anguished character. He is a millionaire industrialist involved in a plastic trade. There are no luxuries that he cannot afford. Despite that, he feels void and visionless. Batt et al., (2022) suggests that:

Bhaskar isn't only a modern-day Hamlet torn between being and not being; Arun Joshi adds to his predicament by asking him to believe or not believe. He reminds me of Abhimanyu from The Mahabharat, who can't seem to get out of Chakravyuha. Bhaskar loses himself in the Chakravyuha of life and death, reality and truth, doubt and trust. In his attempt to understand the cosmic riddle, Bhaskar is a modernised, secularised, empiricised, sceptical Najiketa who was denied the faith and resolution of the Upnishadic model. (p. 1172)

He is torn between 'the hunger of the Body' and 'the hunger of the Spirit.' His hunger of the body manipulates him to befriend with *kama*, *krodh*, *lobha*, *moha*, *mada*, *mascharya* (desire, anger, greed, allurements, lust, and pride); his hunger of the spirit spurs him to get *moksha*



(liberation) as he has already confronted the previous three paths of life, namely *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* (duty, wealth, and desire). Lust still is a great obstacle for him as he clings to it absorbingly. He has everything he wishes. He is a modern Midas. He has degrees from the "world's finest universities, has knowledge of Krishna and of Buddha" (p. 11), "youth" (p. 27), an "extraordinary"(p. 11) woman as his wife and two children. However, he is incomplete and feels restless. He is bothered and tormented not by the objects of the world, but by the voids of the world, and the voids and emptiness of the soul. He says, "Through the light of my days and the blackness of my nights and the disquiet of those sleepless hours beside my wife, within reach of the tranquilizers, I had sung the same stridden song: I want. I want. I want. I want" (p. 11). This urge for the quest of Bhaskar resonates with the *Advaitic* principle aptly summarized by Raja Rao when he writes, " Man's life here in *Samsara* (world) is an august mission to find the Absolute" (qtd. in Dayal, 1991, p. 21). The urge for spiritual quest arises from man's consciousness of the futility of the world which is an enactment of the divine play. He has run and still runs behind material accomplishments that in turn give him no peace. Rather he feels chased by an unseen emptiness in his life. Although power, money and women abound around him, he feels unavailing of his existence. Sharma and Raizada aptly sketch the character of Bhaskar when they write, "Som Bhaskar...represents the contemporary phase of dilemma of modern man groping through the labyrinth of life, existence and reality" (2013, p. 4).

Bhaskar is a Brahmin who has turned into a money spinner. But he cannot escape from his racial conscious that propels him to 'seek' and 'see'. He is a man of intellect and reason, who always clings to proofs, logic, or evidence. He even seeks the evidence of the existence of God. He is a "sad man" (p. 56) who has lost his direction to righteousness, and therefore, feels uprooted from his true self. His affair with Leela Sabins breaks down because she too has no place for spirit, whereas Bhaskar longs for the integrated world of matter and spirit. He urges for "something somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined" (p. 82). His spiritual crisis is not addressed properly by modern psychiatrists. Delving deep into Bhaskar's problems, Leela tells him that "...maybe what you want is a mystical identification, identification with a godhead, as most Hindus want sooner or later" (p. 113). Leela's remarks underscores that Bhaskar must meet a right soul which will guide him to spiritual fulfillment. It is essentially *Advaitic* principle that a seeker needs a *Guru* (mentor) who can guide him through the complexities of life, dismantle the constructs of the ego and confront the fears that bind him. The role of a *Guru* in a seeker's evolution and transformative journey is crucially celebrated in *Advaitic* texts.

In the process of buying the shares of Aftab, Bhaskar comes in touch with Anuradha, Aftab's unwed wife. She appears to him as a maiden of rarest beauty, an antique looking woman. She looks like a "monument: tall, handsome, ruined, ...thirty, thirty five... from Bengal, from Sikkim, from the valleys of Nepal" (p. 12). She is a woman "around whom wars might have been fought" (p. 133). She is like a primordial power that Bhaskar can neither achieve wholly nor ignore. The more he makes love to her the more he longs for her. Anuradha is like dark goddess, inscrutable, whose energy is unfathomable and inexhaustible. She holds a significant



place in Bhaskar's life both in bodily and spiritual terms. For Bhaskar, she is perhaps a guiding principle. Bhaskar meets a Sufi's daughter Gargi, a deaf-mute, who herself is believed to possess divine power. Once during a conversation, Gargi tells him that "Anuradha is your *shakti*" (p. 121). She also admonishes him never to quarrel with her. Bhaskar feels very close and soothing in the presence of Gargi and he "felt at home with her...Only she understands. The only one who understands" (p. 117). The presence of Gargi releases him from all anxieties. She tells him, "God will send someone to help you ...someone has known suffering" (p. 118). Gargi's 'someone' is Anuradha. It is she who will save him from spiritual crisis; it is she who knows suffering. She has suffered untold miseries in her life. She appears as a feminine principle to him. What he needs is trust and devotion to Anuradha.

Bhaskar's scientific temperament, however, makes him doubt what Gargi says, and he puts another question, "But what if there is no God?" (p. 118). It is this lack of faith that causes him to suffer. He feels frustrated, insomniac, neurotic and uprooted, while people around him enjoy everyday life even in suffering and in the face of death. Bhaskar is not at all affected by his intellect when he sucks the pleasure of sex and wealth. But when the matter of the God's existence comes or when he is expected to have absolute faith in God, his disbelief culminates and asks for the proof of His existence. His mother was not at all affected by the thought of death. She believed she would be saved and cured by the wooden image of Krishna. He, however, believes that his mother died due to her unnecessary faith in Lord Krishna. It is his disbelief in cosmic mystery that chases him like a dragon, and he finds himself in utmost despair. The *Geeta* celebrates faith in Him that will keep sufferings away from a man. Glorifying the faith in God and the power of devotion, Tuka Ram says, "God realizes Himself in the devotion of His worshippers. Likewise, faith is essential to their realization of Him" (qtd. in Meitei, 2001, p. 96). Bhaskar, unlike his mother, is afraid of the very thought of death. He feels unsecured. He confesses "I was mortally afraid of death" (p. 74). He needs someone as his *Guru* who can teach him that death is the greatest lie ever invented. Death as such does not exist. Katha Upanisad says, "If the killer thinks he kills and if the killed man thinks he is killed, neither of these apprehends aright. The Self kills not, nor is It killed" (Nikhilanand, 1949, p. 9). If he wants to face death peacefully and fearlessly, he must be guided by the *Vedantic* precepts that the *self* in a man is eternal and imperishable.

When Bhaskar is told about Anuradha's power of healing him from all kinds of crises, he approaches her instinctively, but does not take her as *Shakti* (feminine principle). He visits to Benaras to enjoy the company of Anuradha, who provides him sexual bliss. But still he feels void in him and decides to leave for Europe, America, and Japan on a tour with his wife Geeta. Soon he returns to India as there are no places that comfort him and help him transcend his spiritual crisis. He feels sick and drained out of energy. Dr. Kashyap monitors him, does ECG, and declares that there is "nothing as such wrong with" (p. 115) him.

Once, Anuradha and Bhaskar are on the hill station to spend a few days. She suggests Bhaskar for a visit to the Krishna temple, and he reacts aggressively. He does not like any mentioning of God and temple. But when Anuradha says, "There is a god in those mountains" (p. 157), he



becomes ready to go there, and does penance. He visits the shrine but still feeling void within and sees a deity beside which a flame burns. He bows before it, but still haunted by the thought of Anuradha, who has left him. He reacts violently for his failure to find Anuradha, and hence Gargi responds by writing on the pad "God does not work in this simple manner, God does not seek revenge" (p. 213). She suggests that the existence of God can be experienced through self-surrender or submission, not by means of logic or proofs. This statement of Gargi echoes the essence of *Gita*, *Upanishad*, or principles of *Advaita*.

Bhaskar loves hearing and discussing about God. He says "It was about God that I wanted to hear" (p. 128). His skepticism does not leave him. He needs proof to believe in God. On the auspicious day of *Janmashtami*, he along with Anuradha and Aftab visits Lord Krishna's temple in Benaras. Even there in the pious feet of Krishna, Bhaskar is seeking for the empirical existence of God. He absolutely fails to realise that surrender to Absolute dismantles the intervening fantasies like greed, ego, anger, desire, lust, etc, and opens one's vision to see the world infused with His presence. There, while discussing the evolution theory, he says "Darwin did not say how we are supposed to evolve further" (p. 132). This line clearly marks that he needs evolution, spiritual enhancement, and cosmic awareness that will help him know the world in totality and he will be beyond sorrow and joy. However, he searches for this remedy in science. To this, Anuradha responds, "Maybe Krishna begins where Darwin left off" (p. 132). Bhaskar is stunned by the depth of her remark. He feels her depth is unfathomable. In front of her, he realizes his spiritual bankruptcy. He is a tortured soul, absolutely running after *maya* (veil) of wealth and sex. Discontent is his trademark. He hears the voices of all. He complains, "All my life I have heard voices....I hear them a little too often and a little too loud.... of the dead, relatives, authors, scoundrels, saints" (p. 68). The problem with him is that he does not listen to his own voice, the voice that echoes from his soul. It is not that he does not want to believe. He wants but fails. He says, "I want to believe. But one can't order belief" (p. 213). Bhaskar experiences the first beacon of self-realisation after he is tired of his entire journey from Bombay to Benaras, from wealth to sex, and from wife to strangers. All through his life, he has been searching the bliss and peace in the world of reason, but now he realises that meaning of life can be traced only through the path of faith and belief. Back in Mumbai, he longs for Anuradha, who is untraceable now. He has a small statue of a little silver Krishna, flute, and all sent by Anuradha, with a brief note that reads, "I got this from Gargi, you must always keep it with you" (p. 169). She knows Bhaskar is a restless soul, and he needs a soothing balm. She suggests him to visit the mountains where lepers are waiting for the mercy of the Lord to cure their diseases. The proposed solution aptly fits within the *Upanishadic-advaitic* system of thought. Celebrating the omnipresence and omnipotence of Krishna, and his place in Hindus' life, Hari Mohan (1986) writes, "The presence of Krishna in the mother's room, in the human forms of the dancing pair on *Janmashtami* day in Benaras, in the mountains, in the blue flame burning since ages, is an implicit demonstration of the essence of Indian spiritual heritage that the *Atman* (Brahma, God) is in every atom" (p. 105). This precept from Anuradha comes as the first ray of self-realisation that shakes his skepticism and Cartesianism. He develops a



sense of faith towards Krishna and admits that, "...there was nothing simple about Krishna. Had it been so, he would not have survived ten thousand years" (p. 173). For the first time, he sees within himself and proclaims, "Deep inside my heart I knew I was a leper, that I need a cure" (p. 126). He comes to this realization after a long troubled journey of labyrinth primarily through Anuradha. She is the feminine principle, messenger of the Lord Krishna. She comes as a light in the dark that had engulfed Bhaskar. His veil of *maya* is unveiled by Anuradha, who embodies *Shakti*. In this context, Mohan (1990) observes that, "Anuradha who, Gargi had told him, was her *Shakti*, the animating fleshly form and who was on her way to resurrect Krishna for him" (p. 87). Similarly, Dr. Kashyap, Aftab, and Geeta, Bhaskar's wife, are great forces who make him transcend spiritual crisis. Geeta's trade mark is her trust in Lord. She has shattered the shackle of reasons that had obstructed Bhaskar's vision. He confesses and says that Geeta shook "me gently as though rousing a man from sleep" (p. 224). Metaphorically, she has ignited his spirit and has initiated him for cosmic vision. Highlighting the role of Geeta, Dwivedi (1991) asserts, "Geeta is the only remedy for a sick brain like that of Som Bhaskar and by identifying with her he can realise true hope and peace (note the implied significance of her name - Geeta as though suggesting directly the philosophical treatise of the Hindus!" (p. 102). Bhaskar is optimistically on the path of self-realisation "through love for Anuradha and Geeta, thus amalgamating the sensuous and the spiritual" (Sharma, 2022, p. 52). His assertion, "I want to assure I am not vain....I want to know...not vain" (p. 214) is a testimony of his journey to higher goal in life. He does not renounce the world. He celebrates his life in new light. He realises that he is not separate from the world but in the world itself. This principle of Bhaskar twins to the *Upanishadic* principle of "not giving up worldly affairs but continuing to perform them in such a way that they do not create any difficulty in the matter of obtaining Release" (Tilak, 1965, p. 82). Further, he experiences his absolute unity with the stars, the earth, and all the living and non-living entities, coupling his self with the universal essence. This climatic moment of Bhaskar aligns with the core tenet of *Advaita*.

Conclusion

Arun Joshi's protagonist Som Bhaskar comes to an end of his long and troubled journey by accepting the world as it is and yet staying unaffected from the veils and sins of the world. Initially tormented by his existential crisis, he sets out a spiritual quest, and ultimately experiences transformation of highest kind. He has fully sublimated his *kama* and regards money as dirt. He comes to the realization what the *Gita* says, "Sensual pleasures are the source of pain, for they have a beginning and an end. So the illuminate cannot rejoice in them" (Roy, 1976, 5.22). In his long pilgrimage, he has experienced much trials and tribulations mainly because of his dry bones of the reasons. The journey from Mumbai to Benaras, visits to various *dargahs*, and Krishna's temple help him sublimate his desires for wealth and sex. His relations and encounter with various persons work as a catalyst for him to find the right and sure ways to self-liberation. His longing for physical pleasures slowly disappears and he listens to the *anhad naad* (celestial music) of Krishna's flute. In this journey from *avidya* (ignorance) to



vidya (knowledge), from darkness to light, and from refusal to acceptance of life, Bhaskar is greatly affected and transformed by Hindu philosophy of *Advaita*, the *Gita*, and the *Upanishad*.

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