

EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY IN ARUN JOSHI'S THE LAST LABYRINTH

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Abstract :

The exploration of identity in Arun Joshi's The Last Labyrinth reveals the intricate layers of self-discovery and the existential dilemmas faced by the protagonist. Through a series of profound encounters and introspective moments, Joshi delves into the complexities of cultural conflict and personal alienation, ultimately highlighting the search for meaning in a fragmented world. According to Robert Louis Stevenson, "to be idle requires a strong sense of personal identity." (1900). This shows how crucial it is to know who you are. The protagonist, Som Bhaskar, is perpetually on a quest to discover who he is in The Last Labyrinth by Arun Joshi.

Keywords : exploration, self-discovery, existential dilemmas, introspective moments, cultural conflict, alienation

Introduction :

Indian novelist, Arun Joshi (1939–1993) wrote the novel The Last Labyrinth. His birthplace was Varanasi. He came from a highly educated family. His father was distinguished academic and botanists. He is an accomplished writer who went to college in the United States and then went back to India to work as an industrial manager. As an extracurricular activity outside of his corporate job, he began writing. Albert Camus and other thinkers in the existentialist tradition have had an impact on him. His experience working at a mental institution has greatly benefited his job. In 1982, The Sahitya Academic Award went to him for this novel. If you're looking for modern Indian writing in English, he's right up there. Tensions stemming from people's searches for identity and meaning in life are prevalent in his stories, and many of these characters experience alienation themselves. He received a great deal of critical acclaim in India for his novel that dealt with existential issues and moral dilemmas. His focus is on the story's trajectory, characters, and perspective. His groundbreaking use of narrative method had a significant impact on literature.

The Foreigner, The Apprentice, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, and The City and the River are among the other novels written by Arun Joshi. "The Only American from Our Village" by Arun Joshi, a short story. Lala Shri Ram: A Study in Entrepreneurship and Industrial Management (1975) and Shri Ram: A Biography with Khushwant Singh (1968) are among his other publications.

As the novel progresses, the protagonist, Som Bhaskar, reminisces about his life. It would appear that he is married to the lovely and practical Geeta and they have two children. He is a multimillionaire businessman who attended some of the best schools in the world. He

lives a sophisticated life. What motivates Bhaskar is his ravenous need for more. In his pursuit of material wealth—a lady, a company—he seeks to slake his insatiable need. A constant refrain from his cries is "I want, I want, I want" (9). He had faith in philosophy professor Dr. Leela Sabnis for a while, but his faith quickly faded when she failed to alleviate his symptoms. Someone who can live in both realms would be perfect for him. Traveling to the United States and Europe serves no use for Bhaskar. So he travels from Bombay to Benaras in the course of his quest. Bhaskar is on the verge of taking over Aftab Rai's business when he meets Anuradha. Despite Bhaskar's initial lack of interest in Anuradha, he eventually finds himself drawn to her. They fall in love after feeling an overwhelming attraction to one another. Rather than being kicked out, it became a monster. When Bhaskar's business began to take a nosedive, his friends and family warned him not to become involved with Anuradha. He couldn't bear to be apart from her and refused to let her go. Som Bhaskar is brought to the brink of death by this, but he is miraculously spared.

A kaleidoscope of human feelings encircles the narrative of *The Last Labyrinth*. In its examination of reality's many facets and its daring storytelling method, it tackles the age-old question of why we're here. Obsession and immense love are the main themes in the novel. Includes a plethora of contradictory ideas; it's about a troubled man's fight for existence in the face of consumerism, corruption, estrangement, and a decline in spiritual faith. With lyrical fluency and word after phrase that paints a vivid picture, Joshi writes persuasively.

Later on, he takes up the role of Anuradha's hunter. After he returns from the dead, Anuradha acts strangely, wanting to escape from him, but he fails to notice.

Som Bhaskar and Anuradha are the main characters in the *Last Labyrinth*. The businessman Som Bhaskar is constantly on the go throughout the novel. He comes from affluent parents, has a good education, and has enough money to enjoy life to the fullest. His insatiable appetite, nevertheless, remains a mystery. Because he has been morally and culturally estranged from society, he is unable to return to it. Identity and alienation are issues that this character represents. A woman named Anuradha has deemed marriage to be a waste of time. In addition, her view of love is more indicative of a spiritual or idealistic kind. Her aunt takes care of her upbringing. The only reason she has stayed with Aftab Rai is because of Gargi, not Aftab himself. In spite of her profound impact on Bhaskar, her persona takes on an odd quality as the story draws to a close. She seeks refuge in the last maze due to her intense feelings for Som Bhaskar.

Bhaskar is very conscientious about purchasing Aftab's stock. Then he learns that the deaf-mute priestess Gargi is keeping Aftab's shares in the highlands. As Dr. Kashyap follows behind, Bhaskar makes his way to the mountain. He learns the truth about why Anuradha left him there. He would next travel to Benaras to see Anuradha after receiving the shares. When Anuradha suddenly vanishes, the plot takes a dramatic turn. All throughout her apartment, he seeks for Anuradha. In her haste to escape his clutches, she vanishes into the last maze. Following that, he was unable to locate her. The protagonist becomes entangled in a web of falsehoods, partial facts, and misinformation. The novel synopsis comes to a close with this.

Identity exploration through character analysis is the central theme of this endeavour.

Seeking one's own identity is the essence of the search for identity. A literary self-confrontation occurs when a character faces internal struggles such as bewilderment or terror. Although the conflict takes place inside, the protagonists are not immune to outside influences.

Exploration of self-identity in the novel :

Azizun, Gargi, Som Bhaskar, Geeta, Aftab Rai, Anuradha, Mr. Thapar, Leela Sabnis, and a handful of minor characters round up the cast of *The Last Labyrinth*. The protagonists in Arun Joshi's works frequently connect with and form relationships with female characters who are involved in the conflict. Similarly, once Anuradha saves the life of the novel's protagonist, Som Bhaskar, the two become inseparable. Both of these characters are pivotal to the plot. Understanding who these two primary individuals are is the focus of this chapter.

The concept of identical crises has always held literary significance. It is directly related to the writer's concerns on subjects. Uncertainty over one's own identity is a common thread in tragic stories. It is not a lack of self-awareness but rather an inability to face fear head-on that plagues the narrator. In this contemporary tragedy, the hero does not die but leads a life bereft of heroism due to the internal struggle between his real and fake selves.

At 35 years old, Som Bhaskar inherits a plastic manufacturing firm and becomes a rich industrialist. At the age of twenty-five, he receives the substantial industrial fortune that belonged to his father. He has attended some of the best schools in the world. He developed a preference for materialism and a western worldview as a result of this. Som has two children with his wife Geeta, who is a deeply religious woman.

Som feels empty on the inside and out as a result of his dissatisfaction. While visiting the Ajanta Caves at the age of eighteen, he experiences his first "void"; he shows no emotion in response to the news of his mother's death. The sight of funeral pyres, the smell of burning flesh, and the sound of exploding bones give him the same sensation of emptiness even on the Manikarnika Ghats at Benares. He tosses and turns all night trying to figure out what's causing this emptiness. He attempts to satisfy this void with sex, money, and celebrity, but he fails miserably because he doesn't know what he wants. It would be great if everyone knew their desires—or at “If only one knew what one wanted, or, may be, 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”(48). — was also a maze.

There is no one like Som Bhaskar in the novel. His name, which means Moon-Sun, creates an inherent tension in his nature. Physical and spiritual hunger plague him. The person you become as an adult is not something that happens overnight but rather is the product of years of formative experiences beginning in infancy. Unfortunately, Som Bhaskar's parents did not show him any love or affection. Upon learning that his mother had died of cancer, he put his faith in Lord Krishna rather than in medical treatments. The wife of Som's headmaster applies the healing touch to him at that moment. A loving sign, nonetheless, in his eyes. It is the first step in Som's journey towards discovering who she is. Despite the fact that he was aware that all material possessions are in fact filth and trash. That was his mission. He has been chasing sexual gratification since the age of twenty-five, and his chant of discontent is "I want,

I want, I want" (9). He establishes sexual connections with a number of women, including librarians, nurses, aunts, friends, and spouses, but his appetite remains unfulfilled despite his devoted and educated wife.

From his parents' and his family's side, Bhaskar inherited conflicting influences. Scientist "The First Cause" was his father's lifelong goal. Being born with two sets of genes makes Som feel out of place in every situation. He was aware that his father suffered from six symptoms of depression and sleeplessness. His father's religiosity and his grandfather's sensuality have passed on to him. "Said a lot of things that either made two obvious a sense or no sense at all"(66) when Som sees many psychiatrists following his father's death; their explanations are similar to Jung's thesis.

He has lost all ability to think straight due to his agitated condition. "I am dislocated," he says to Anuradha. "Who am I? My thoughts have wandered. Just why am I even here? Here we have" (97). Whether it's a mystery woman, trust in God, or stock in a company, he wants it all. The meaning of existence begins to loom large in his mind. When he confides in his medical buddy Kashyap about his dread of dying, he says that Som is more concerned with living than with dying.

Leela Sabnis is Som's friend, lover, and philosophy professor; her husband filed for a divorce because she reads too much. By asking her to help him rationalize his pain, Som hopes she may help him to overcome his dissatisfaction and empty feeling. She has done an excellent job of dissecting Som Bhaskar's personality. She says that his identity crisis is to blame for all of these. "Maybe what you desire is a mystical identification, identification with a godhead, as the majority of Hindus want, sooner or later," she suggests (113). Leela is no longer the person Som desired once she states categorically that the material and spiritual realms cannot coexist.

He claims to be in search of a place, person, or thing where the two realms merged. To him, the ideal person would be one in whom the material and ethereal realms converge. Frustrated and disillusioned, he continues to be. Despite his inseparable bond with Geeta, he continues to exhibit an unusual fixation with females. Despite the fact that Geeta is rational, sensitive, and the perfect wife, he is unhappy with her. He then gets in touch with Anuradha. In the request of Aftab, Som pays a visit to him and Anuradha in the Lal Haveli, a maze-like structure. Here he learns that Anuradha lives with Aftab rather than being married to him. The novel's key metaphor is Lal Haveli. It represents all the unanswered mysteries that continue to haunt Som. It represents the cycle of life and death as well as the coming to know God. "I realized, that it was a maze that we were moving through," Som remarks. The whole Haveli might be a maze, after all"(31). One can learn about Som's mental state via his travels with Aftab and Anuradha. Som seeks the counsel of the deaf-mute priestess Gargi. "God will send someone for you"(107) is how she expresses her response in writing.

Her response makes it very evident that she is Anuradha, and Gargi goes on to say that she is Som's Shakti. Gargi denotes the heavenly force that may elevate Som's sex to the level of spirit by using the term Shakti. It is because of these things that Som has come to believe in God's existence.

Som goes back to Bombay after a few days and has a lot of experiences he can't make sense of. Before he dies, he had a heart attack. She can't stand to be around him anymore, Anuradha says. Anuradha's peculiar behavior has wounded Som's pride. He plans to purchase Aftab's firm as a form of punishment. However, it delivers Som the unanticipated consequence of rejection. Som encounters Gargi at the Temple on their ascent to the mountain top for Aftab's portion. Som reveals Dr. Kashyap's identity to Gargi at that point. Anuradha vowed to leave Som for good and shocked Som when he heard from Dr. Kashyap how she begged with Gargi to learn that Som is dying of a heart attack. Som has not yet come to terms with it.

Man may find solace from the perplexing of this materialistic world only via his faith in God. It is not simple to comprehend God in such a short period, Gargi tells him, and the immensity of the universe is God's labor. Som repents and makes amends after hearing Gargi's insights, which lead him to understand the meaning of existence.

"Anuradha" is a name that nobody knows anything about her. Both her physical and spiritual selves bear the scars of the hardships and tragedies that have marked her life. Because her mother was mad, she was an illegitimate child and a victim of childhood sexual abuse. She has seen the world's evil, including murders and suicides. She was born into a one-room home in Bihar, where her mother would sell her body after singing for strangers in the evenings. Her mom had never tied the knot since she thought she was wed to Krishna. Her aunt took Anuradha to Bombay after she passed away. Even though she is in a convent, she suffers tremendous shame there. Later, she moved in with Aftab Rai at Lal Haveli and entered the film industry. The kindness of a deaf and dumb man named Gargi connected Anuradha and Aftab. Dr. Kashyap prevented Anuradha's suicide when she lost her sight due to smallpox.

She frustrates Som by saying, "It is not me you want. 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 Dargah" (53) She engages in sexual intimacy with him thereafter. After she saves his life, she stays away from him out of immense love. In an effort to break his fixation with Anuradha, Som takes Geeta on a trip to the United States and Europe after he fails miserably at winning her heart. Finally, he gets close to Gargi, but he can't shake the memory of Anuradha. Som can no longer decipher Anuradha. She has utterly captivated Bhaskar. He says, "All I wanted was her, I wanted her body and soul, every bit of her. I wasn't willing to share a hair of her body with anyone" (133).

Eliza Doolittle, the heroine of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, rebels against her possessive and authoritarian master Henry Higgin, much like Anuradha. Just like Som, Anuradha has had her fair share of sorrow and pain. Som is confused about his values and desires. Som continues to feel estranged from himself; the last time he made love to Anuradha, it was with a corpse, not with her; she and her soul continue to elude him. As he frequently says, "I want, I want, I want" (9), his dissatisfaction intensifies. Som is not interested in turning to religion, namely Hinduism and Krishnaism. The divine presence of Lord Krishna follows him wherever he goes. His account leaves out Anuradha's fervor for Krishna. The digression occurs at Som's final encounter with Anuradha and Aftab, and he cites Kierkegaard: "Prayer does not change God but it changes him who prays" (108). He believes that God will pardon him for his arrogance

and transgressions. Despite his repeated requests, Anuradha still declines to go to Bombay with him. She cautions him about staying in Lal Haveli and urges him to leave immediately. The narrative abruptly concludes with Anuradha's demise. "Anuradha is disappeared"(202) is the last line in the novel that describes her life. Hearing this, Som cries out to God for mercy, just like a defeated existentialist. Despite going through a lot of tough times, she is able to vanish without a trace because of her immense love for Som Bhaskar. Her life comes to a tragic conclusion in the novel, which leaves readers with unanswered questions.

The way Som lives his life is a lot like how scientists do experiments. Even though he's depressed, he intends to go to temples every night. Because his uncertainties are tearing him apart, all he wants is to die peacefully. At last, he attempts to end his life. Geeta intervenes when he attempts suicide. The protagonist is led to believe that his life would be at peace once his wife, who is both educated and understanding, trusts him without reservation.

The Last Labyrinth, a work by Joshi, is a metaphor for the modern man's tortured mind fighting off the creeping madness. Throughout the novel, we delve into Som Bhaskar's (the protagonist) troubled mind. The novel ends without passing judgment, but the author does state that the two extremes cannot exist in harmony.

Som meets a tragic end as a result of his uncertainty over his own identity. His inability to face reality stems from his lack of clarity about what he wants. He resided in a realm of delusion. His life was devoid of heroism. When Anuradha gives up her identity for Som, she sacrifices everything. By contrasting Som with Geeta, the author can reveal Som's true nature.

Conclusion :

The Last Labyrinth by Arun Joshi explores the protagonist's feelings of societal and self-alienation. In addition, the protagonist's quest to navigate the complex maze of modern life is a central theme of this novel. In his work, he offers order to the anarchy that permeates modern man's thinking. It is the spiritual autobiography of a wandering spirit trying to make sense of existence and death, as Tapan Kumar Ghosh puts it in Arun Joshi's Fiction: The Labyrinth Of Life "It is a story of deeper seeking through love, the spiritual autobiography of a lost soul groping for the meaning of life and death"(Sharma.79) Soul Bhaskar is a guy of the present day who feels torn between two distinct cultures. He has a lot of obstacles on the path to spiritual enlightenment due to his inflated sense of intellectual pride, his reliance on reason, and his confidence in logic and science. Just as he hasn't been able to accept himself, he can't seem to make sense of the universe, and he wonders whether there's some grand design to existence where all the pieces fit together. His western-influenced reasoning mentality, however, renders his pursuit futile. His need for signs reminds him of the Pharisees' request that Christ performs a miracle to establish the presence of God; he is eager to have faith but is sceptical. He stays alone and contemplative right up until the end. The protagonist, Som, is utterly bewildered throughout the book. He doesn't realize who he is until the very end of the novel. He refuses to acknowledge the truth. Because of it, he has a really difficult existence. Anuradha represents the finest gift of Hinduism—the spirit of sacrifice—as well as the enigmatic, indefinable, and life-giving aspects of women. Countless hardships befell Anuradha. Because of her tragic history, she is able to remain calm and collected under

pressure. Even in the last line of the novel her identity is unravelled :“Anuradha is disappeared” (202).

There is internal conflict as well as external conflict among the characters in this novel. Each character in Joshi's work has a unique existence; for instance, Anuradha's is vanishing, whereas Som's is dying. It shows how a modern man fits into society. God and religion are major themes in Joshi's work. "It is very difficult to steer one's way through life without God, at least concepts like right or wrong," (Sharma.99), Joshi says in an interview with Purabi Benerji in The Sunday Statesman Only by blindly believing in the world's mechanics, according to Joshi, can we make sense of life's mazes. In his view, the only way to reach the ultimate truth and reality is to give up reasoning. To discover the truth of God, one must walk the threefold road of humility, sacrifice, and suffering.

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