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SEARCH FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE PORTRAYED IN ARUN JOSHI'S
THE LAST LABYRINTH

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Abstract

Arun Joshi is one of the modern novelists in English. In his search for themes, he has rejected the larger world in favour of the inner man and has engaged himself in search of the essence of human living. The word "Labyrinth" symbolizes the mysterious experiences of Som while searching for his identity and truth. Joshi presents Gargi as a symbol of living proof of God's presence. The novel continues in the tradition of the first person singular. He suggests in his novels an entirely Indian solution to the spiritual crisis of the youth. The novel deals with detachment principles and the longing for the essentials of life in the mystical urge of the narrator-hero, Som Bhaskar. The protagonist relates the various events of life through a series of flash backs. Like the protagonist of Arun Joshi's novel, Som Bhaskar carries forward the search for meaning of life. He has restless and infatuated urge to know the meaning of existence and life, but he never goes after the absurd. He is torn between faith and doubt. It is due to his western oriented materialistic education. He wants to believe, he tries to believe but he fails because he is helpless. Som belongs to the upper class society and his quest of life too, is for the meaning of life. In his novel Arun Joshi reveals that western values do not provide peace, and self-fulfillment.

Keywords: Self-Identity, detachment, truth, absurd, life and absurd.

Introduction

India was legend long before the Englishmen came and established themselves as the rulers of this land. India for ages followed its old ancient culture with Sanskrit and other languages as the part of their life before the coming of the colonizers. The beginning of English Language and English schools, old beliefs and values started losing their impact on the psyche of the people of

India. The speedy modern and the modernization of life is the cardinal facets of the advanced civilization which caused lot of harm to the culture of India. The modern man has completely engrossed in participating in the new risk of life hence detached from the society and his own self. The craft of living a troubled life without stress, soul searching, and preserving human relationship can collaborate to be called as a sign of backward. The backwardness is nothing but an utterance of

modern man's detachment from his inner self and from the universe. Automatically, man has lost his individual identity and has gone away from the reach of the voice of his soul. He suffers from a sense of not belonging. Finally, he fails to realize his desires and the true meaning of his life. The Indian novelists writing in English have explored the wide implications of this search of self in their works. They tried to evolve a strategy that may lead one to a state of de-alienation. There are number of Indian writers like Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, R.K.Narayan and many others who express emphatically this feeling of man's isolation.

Arun Joshi's heroes, like the ancient sages of the great epics, fall back upon their internal nature. Through intense self-examination and soul-searching, Joshi's heroes attempt to get the way to the difficult labyrinth of life and fulfillment. Arun Joshi as being an Indian writer could not avoid the extensive and infinite impression of the teaching and morals of The Bhagwat Gita on Indian psyche. The foundational supremacy of The Gita is on man and how he should execute. There are many instances where the scribbler has interrupted the values of The Bhagwat Gita, articulating the distress, the problem and the struggle. The most overwhelming problem that man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. The problem of meaninglessness is so constant that it threatens to decay every sphere of human life. One of the greatest blessings of the study of Arun Joshi's novels is the remedy for the problem of meaninglessness so widespread in human life today. The hero of the novel Som Bhaskar is divided between the hunger of the soul and his body dominates the mind.

The Last Labyrinth (1981) is Arun Joshi's fourth novel. The novel has won Sahitya Academy Award in 1983. 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 words like emptiness and darkness. Death itself is a Labyrinth but so is life. He studies modern man's predicament and his psyche and gives his study the shape of novel. Arun Joshi himself

observes: "My novels are essentially attempts forward a better understanding of the world and of myself....if I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my exploitation. The Last Labyrinth is a quest for meaning of life. The narrative located mainly in Bombay and Banares; is an account of Som Bhaskar's business deals and love story. It is a story of deeper seeking through love, a spiritual autobiography of lost soul groping for the meaning of life and death. 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 had educated in the world's finest universities. This led to his western outlook on life and a faith in reason. The novelist has described the predicament of modern man's life with the meaninglessness of his life. Som in the novel is never at peace. There is a constant urge in him to find the meaning of life.

The novelist focuses his attention on the dilemma of the individuals like Som Bhaskar who do not cognize that the labyrinth of life can be puzzled out by confidence rather than science and ratiocination. He is married to Geeta and has two children. Som is aware of the fact that he cannot imagine his life without his wife Geeta in spite of that he develops sexual relationships with different women in order to judge the relation between contraries of his own life. He is unable to find the answers of his quest neither in his wife nor in Professor Leela Sabnis. Leela's world of intellect and difficulty does not stimulate him.

Hari Mohan Prasad critically analyses Som's quest in the following lines, "His hunger is of body and spirit both. Hunger of body is cry for emotional authentication and hunger of spirit is a yearning for self-realization".

Even after knowing the fact that human life is full of difficulties, Som begins his expedition in the quest of excitement, peacefulness and happiness. In this chaotic state of mind, Som encounters with Anuradha. Joshi has given a very clear insight to the character of Anuradha who is an embodiment of selfless love in the world of selfish people. She represents true independence of body and of mind.

Som believes that Anuradha can help him out to search his self because there is something in Anuradha which gives him comfort and he tries to find out the reason behind it. He meets Anuradha for the first-time in a Delhi hotel at a reception organized by Aftab Rai for the Plastic Manufacturers Association. Anuradha appears to him like a monument: tall, handsome and ruined and notices that she is obsolete like her husband. Anuradha becomes an obsession, a passion for Som. He cannot think of anything other than her and he neglects his business, his family and his health in an effort to win her.

Som makes frequent trips to Benaras with the sole motive of getting her for himself. He finds her attractive and sees in her a fascinating personality very different from anyone he had ever known but to certain extent Anuradha remains a mystery to him and at times finds it difficult to understand her real self. When Anuradha realizes that Som wishes to win her heart too and not merely possess her body she simply disappears from his life. Here the novelist depicts the idea of sacrifice on the part of Anuradha by making her leave the scene at the height of their love affair. Commenting on these incidents Arun Joshi himself says: "Anuradha's role in the novel is to lead Bhaskar through the subconscious. Then he loses her. I was hitting at the old classical dictum that you do not get anything without sacrificing something. So she is to be taken away from him". Som returns to Bombay but he has a massive heart attack which kills him. As soon as he recovers he tries to contact Anuradha who refuses to meet him. Som starts feeling more isolated and lonely and a sense of inadequacy, restlessness and aimlessness develops in him. He even urges Gargi, the daughter of Sufi saint to help him out to come out of his problem. He entreats her help and she consoles him while saying that "there is no harm in believing that God exists". The urge to find solutions of all his problems makes Som believe about the existence of a supreme power, a prime mover of the entire universe. Gargi has comprehended him with the existence of God. She protects the life of Som just as a spiritual guide resolves all the conflicts from the mind by answering all the questions.

The novelist tries to prove the existence of the divine power while portraying Gargi as deaf and dumb because she follows to only divine and communicates with the souls. Her connection performs as a cure to the unwell Aftab. Her communication gives refreshment to Anuradha and her glance calms Som. Arun Joshi apprentices her as an emblem of an evidence of the existence of God. Gargi informs Som "we are all children trying to reach up to the crack in the door to peep into a room". He gradually unravels that every individual will have to fabricate his or her attempts to surge God. He begins his expedition in quest of enlightenment and proceeds towards the mountain to meet Lord Krishnan. But when gets the opportunity to encounter a man size fire blazing since time immemorial, he becomes a possessed man. His judging self has a keen preference to destroy his inferior persona through his union with Anuradha, Gargi and Geeta. Anuradha showers her affection on him and inexplicably protects his life from heart attack. Gargi enlightens him with the reality of life and makes him aware about the temporariness of the materialistic progress. Geeta is a very caring wife whose attribute is acceptance, which Som requires. She saves him from the offence of committing suicide, refreshing him from the rest of darkness and ignorance. The novel encapsulates Som's search for conviction through love for Anuradha and for Geeta, thus merge the sensuous and the spiritual.

All the protagonist in Joshi's novels are misfit and they find themselves lonely and rootless in the world they have to live in and face pathlessness and meaninglessness to escaping this feeling, his protagonists make relentless efforts to find out meaning in life. In Last Labyrinth Arun Joshi depicts the tale of a Bombay based businessman, Som Bhaskar, restlessly trying to possess an inefficient plastic company of Benaras Zamindar, Aftab Rai and his pretended wife, Anuradha. In fact, it is the story of a lost soul searching for the meaning of life. Som is able to relieve himself from the pressure of anxiety steaming from his terrifying degradation and to regain his capacity for love and conviction in God, but only after he has undergone some very painful experiences in the process of his spiritual

awakening. Colin Wilson says, "so long as a man is not horrified at himself he knows nothing about himself".

Arun Joshi presents in *The Last Labyrinth* feudal possessive conduct and human values. It is the human values that are of greater importance for the peaceful existence of the human beings. Human values of love, sacrifice and faith are indispensable for the smooth running of human life. In the novel Arun Joshi presents Som Bhaskar suffering from his faithless, doubtful rational and possessive attitude towards life. He concludes the novel with the possibilities of the protagonist coming to faith. Anuradha's faith in Krishna and her sacrifice in love, Gargi's faith in God help Som to some extent to realize his restless self, Arun Joshi himself says, "Anuradha's role in the novel is to lead Bhaskar through the subconscious. Then he loses her. I was hinting at the old classical dictum that you do not get anything without sacrificing. So he is to be taken away from him.

Joshi describes the hidden and mysterious world of Benaras, Anuradha, Aftab and Gargi with greater force and passion. Tapan Ghosh Kumar interprets, "The novels holds up a mirror to a certain section of the present day Indian society with its skepticism, self-satisfaction, loss of faith, confusion of values, and anxieties. Som Bhaskar, a typical product of the upper-crust, is unable to come to terms with life because of his failure to come to terms with himself". The novelist's approach is to reenact the conflicts, confusion, quests and predicament of the life of the life of modern man by criticizing the modern civilization which is busy in gaining materialistic possession.

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