

**A Dialectical Examination of the Journey From
Reason to Intuition in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth***

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The Last Labyrinth, a well-plotted briskly written piece remarkably has enshrined its author Arun Joshi in the pantheon of writers in the English language the world over. This compelling novel about a quest encapsulates a dialectical operation through which the complex demands can be understood. Joshi examines notions, feelings, thoughts, doubts, dilemmas, ideas and sensations by delving deep into “the hidden recesses of the human psyche in order to discover the ultimate truths” (Jeevan 30). There is a constant confrontation between the inner world of consciousness and the outer world of phenomenon.

The quest for the purpose of life begins in the city of Bombay and culminates in the city of Benares. Bombay is the city of trade and commerce. It is the city of ruthless businessmen who cannot think and live beyond the profit of their business transactions. Benares, on the other hand, is the city of Lights. It is a city associated with the life of Krishna, of the purification of the soul, and the possibility of salvation. Som Bhaskar who hails from Bombay meets Aftab who hails from Benares. While Som is hungry for the pleasures of the body, Aftab is detached and seeks the society of the soul. *The Last Labyrinth* becomes a site for the interactions between Som and Aftab so that the timeless clash of the body and the soul is played out in every conceivable manner.

When Som experiences the inner call – the want – crashing into his consciousness, he becomes conscious of another development “that evening I [he] had already laid the pincers on Aftab’s business” (12). So, one finds two Som Bhaskars here: the businessman who is expanding his material empire and the individual who is elected to a spiritual quest.

Som Bhaskar, the son of a prosperous businessman, is groomed to get things at any cost. He also develops intolerance towards personal failures and professional hiccups. The inability to find mental equilibrium tells upon the health of Som: “From midnight till three I sit and moon. If I believed in God I could pray, maybe run a rosary through my fingers. But that’s out. Sitting around, I get into arguments: with the living and with the dead, with myself. And I have had enough of the world’s arguments” (10).

Som’s immature handling of his life and his escapist tipping rob him of his sleep. By wavering in his mission to seek the meaning of life, he murders his peace as does Macbeth by murdering Duncan. The dialectic is between the individual who trusts in God and the individual

who trusts himself. i.e. between the Prayer and the Argument. One who trusts in God tends towards the philosophical position of Soren Kierkegaard and one who trusts himself tends towards the philosophical position of Jean Paul Sartre. There is a journey towards the interior in the case of Prayer, while it is a journey towards the outside world in the case of an Argument. The orientation of Prayer is more towards the integration of energies and elements. The orientation of Argument is more towards a clash, a quarrel, a discord, and a conflict.

Som finds himself caught between the dialectically opposed temperaments of his mother and his father. His mother is a devout believer in the strength of prayer and what can be achieved by trusting the transcendental powers. Som's father is a symbol of individualism and self-belief. The crisis bursts in the consciousness of Som which is recorded by him in the following manner: "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 tranquillisers, I had sung the same strident song: I want. I want. I want. I want" (11). The crisis of Som is that he is educated and still he stumbles. He has a well developed skill for communication, but he is unable to explain his miasmatic situation to another person. He is a keen observer of life, yet he does not see the meaning of the inner call. He expresses his frustration: "I could do no better than produce the same rusty cry: I want, I want" (11), yet he does not know what he wants. This yields him disquiet and sleepless nights.

Anuradha proves the perfect dialectical opposite to Som when she engages him in a conversation regarding his business ambitions. While his philosophy is one of grabbing and taking away from others, she believes in giving. To Som, the world is a battlefield. To Anuradha, it is space. Som's is the "most formidable argument of them all in business, as elsewhere, ...it was the survival of the fittest"(19). He thinks about his new moves to completely prevail over Aftab whom he nominates as his the other, his adversary, and his rival. He will resume the struggle with him for existence and realize his philosophy of the survival of the fittest. It is creative in the sense that Som devices ways, strategies, and moves to go after opportunities with an eye on profit. In the business world, there is little room for humanity, consideration, and let-live sentiments.

The dialectical opposition between the Phallus of the nuclear reactor and the Phallus of Shiva is the dialectical opposition between Science and Faith. It is the opposition between the explanation of the Causes by the pursuit in the scientific discipline called Physics and the explanation of the Causes by an implicit subservience to the spiritual discipline called Metaphysics. While Science is certain even when it keeps revising its inferences from time to time, Faith is certain even when the spiritual pronouncements do not change, only the terms for the interpretative exercises change to keep in tune with the culture of the times. The apparent certainty of Physics in the changing world and the real certainty of Metaphysics in an unchanging world of values make Som's father reflect on the dialectical opposition: "I believe in science, yes, but science cannot solve the problem of the causes. Not many realize this paradox"(26).

The dialectical opposition between the Scientist and the Mystic is with respect to the aspect of acceptability. The Scientist bases his work on the foundation of public acceptability.

The Mystic is not swayed by popular appeal or public demand, hence his taciturnity with regard to God. Som's father tells his friend, K that man is uncomfortable without evidence. Without it, one does not have helpful signposts in his search either for the secrets of the Physical world or the Metaphysical. He understands that if the Mystic becomes as communicative as the Scientist, a wider door will be opened to the abstract world of Faith. He tells K, "If only the mystics could offer their evidence of God as the scientists do!" (27).

The conversation of Aftab, Anuradha, and Som in the Haveli touches life and career. Aftab has a philosophical attitude towards life which he carries into his business. He does not feel the need for any differentiation between the personal man and the professional man. Som, on the other hand, has a cold calculating temperament which suits his business career. He carries the calculating temperament of the businessman into life itself. Som does not believe in the integrative personality of Aftab. On the contrary, he thinks Aftab is doomed to fail because he integrates his professional life along with his personal life through the instrumentality of a philosophical disposition. Som prefers to privilege the image of the businessman over the cultivated individual. This makes him look at Aftab and Anuradha critically and evaluate their personalities. However, it must be observed that in spite of his calculated moves, Som is unable to penetrate the garment of spirituality with which Aftab and Anuradha are draped. They are more attuned to receive and respond to intimations which are, in the eyes of Som, other-worldly. Anuradha is the least calculating like Aftab. Yet, she has an overpowering influence on Som. C.D. Chingre characterizes Anuradha as "Adishakthi- the driving and shaping force" (155). In comparison, Som is filled with self-consciousness and guilt. The rational man Som, who is conscious of his capacity to negotiate reality, finds himself located within the Haveli.

To Som, there are voids all around him while to Anuradha, there are substantial entities everywhere, each communicating its meaning to the individual. Som observes: "Anuradha was relaxed, lost in heaven knew what happy thoughts. What filled me was the dread, cold sweat and a familiar turbulence" (45). The spontaneity in the unselfconscious Anuradha is sadly missing in Som rendering his gesture as a void. Such a person cannot but feel, in a moment of clear insight, that: "It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me" (47).

Som's capacity for seeing is limited to the merely visible objects. He, by being too critical of his situation and suspicious of intentions, creates barriers for himself from seeing things in clear light. Som finds himself sunk in "so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement" (Brunton 7). He, with all the strength of his rational faculty, manages only voids while those whom he criticizes like Aftab, Anuradha, and Gargi are capable of profound insights. His reason is unable to understand how the others are more perspicacious even when they are not so intellectually endowed as he is. Som admits: "Once again, against my will, I was drawn helplessly into the labyrinth of their mysterious world" (60). Rajeshwar and Brahmananda Chary diagnosing the crisis in Som's mind feel that his western upbringing has "caused a dislocation in the psyche" (181). The frustration happens with the realization that there are things and experiences not always confined to the physical world and they are "metaphysical questions" (Mukherjee 124) that go beyond the rational capacity of man.

Som's supreme faith in the power of reason to visualize, to quantify, to qualify, to evaluate, to summarize, to simplify, and to provide patterns of thinking makes him conclude that all knowing is a territory that will fall to the sword of his reason. Anuradha realizes that Som is full of his own convictions that it is impossible for him to listen to others. "as a result of the dominance of sterile intellect over the inner strength of life" (Meitei 12). With her outburst: "But let me tell you something: You are not as clever as you think. You are wrong about many things. You are wrong even about yourself. You think you know a lot, in fact, you don't" (61). The "outburst" of Anuradha makes Som travel deep into himself looking for the clues, leads, and footholds with which to organize his life on a better platform of thinking. This also brings into perspective the condition of self-consciousness.

Som manages to extricate himself from the situation hitherto of being "lost in labyrinth of desires" (Mathur 142). He starts looking at the world not through his self but as an entity outside his self. He also becomes conscious of "aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world" (Fromm 59).

In the present state of heightened consciousness, Som recalls his conversations with Leela Sabnis, an inveterate philosophy scholar. Som is able to understand how Leela has introduced him to the thinking of Descartes who also privileges reason. He is able to see how inadequate he has been in pursuing the line of reasoning to its logical Cartesian ends. Leela follows her discussion about Descartes with her discussion on Spinoza. The seed for deep philosophical contemplation germinates later in the mind of Som. Leela tells him that Descartes "explained it all a long time ago" (80) using the principle of reason. He is known to have used the principle of differentiation to separate "matter from spirit. [To Descartes] the soul, too, has to be reasoned through" (81). The Cartesian system does not allow any reasonable space for intuition or faith which is the dialectical concern of Som. He remembers his own father's concern with Spinoza's principle of integration. Spinoza is handy in explaining the problematic relationship between matter and spirit. Som asks Leela, "Didn't he [Spinoza] say both matter and spirit embraced in God, and flowed from Him?" (81). The dialectic between the Differentiation of Descartes and the Integration of Spinoza gestates in the mind of Som when he realizes the fundamental interconnectedness of entities like reason and its 'other' like intuition and faith.

Som admits "What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined" (82). The worlds of matter and spirit are seen integrated in Anuradha. He needs Anuradha because his want can only be satisfied with the complementary strength of Anuradha's spirituality, her immaculate grace, her moral force, and the tremendous power of communication which is more powerful than spoken words as in a rational argument. In one candid moment, closeted with Anuradha, Som tells her that he is destined to kill himself. Soon, tears well up in his eyes and he is inconsolable. He tells her that perhaps Anuradha is the object of his "sole cry and soul's cry" 'I want' (Rao 13). For the second time Anuradha tells him: "You don't want me. You don't know what you want" (106). He welcomes the assessment of Anuradha as a necessary spur towards the end he is seeking "Nothing had interested me more than the secrets of the universe" (129), which is the end to which his want must take him. Som

wriggles out of the difficult time with life through his most fruitful interaction with Anuradha. He admits that he does not believe in God. He feels that "God is like having a third king in a game of chess" (166). Yet he is enlightened by Anuradha about the need for one to make the appropriate sacrifice. It is also impressed upon him that it is not enough to be a wantor merely. "You have to sacrifice before you are given" (166) says Anuradha. Som does not move completely to the side of belief but one can see him put the first firm foot in that direction when Anuradha tells him without Som's denial: "You want to have faith" (166). She also diagnoses the real problem of Som that he wants "to reserve the right to challenge" (166) his own faith. The gift of Anuradha is meant to complete the education of Som who must move from wanting to giving as the Lord symbolizes through His giving of music and harmony to the world.

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