

## Existential Experiences in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* (1981)

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Arun Joshi endeavours to elicit an exploratory exposition of the self through the perception of the past and the existential experiences of the present. Alienation of the self in Joshi's novels often leads to the quest for self-identity.

Arun Joshi has been bothered much by the human despairs and sufferings of an extraordinary kind. He is thus able to give a vivid account of the inner turbulence of his heroes. He puts his heroes in the labyrinth of life and they come out of this labyrinth after a heroic struggle. The protagonists do not suffer from external human forces but are troubled by their internal characteristics. Fear, loneliness, deception, corruption and hypocrisy of the heroes themselves are their undoing.

Absurdity, anarchy, meaninglessness, emptiness, alienation and despair are some of the characteristic features of the existential philosophy, but the most important element which stresses the sanctity of the subjective individuality is the authenticity of the self. Enmeshed in the debilitating and circumscribing ambience, the existentialist is constantly aware of the inevitability and the finality of death. Most of Arun Joshi's heroes are alienated beings; Sindi Oberoi in **The Foreigner** is alienated from society and Billy Biswas in **The Strange Case of Billy Biswas** is alienated from the civilized world and his own family. RatanRathor in **The Apprentice** reconciles himself to the world but in the process he becomes alienated from his family, and friends. **The Last Labyrinth** is a quest for identity in life, SomBhaskar in **The Last Labyrinth** listens to the strident music of his soul, "I want, I want I want", but cannot decipher its meaning accurately.

He was lost, all alone in his mental sufferings. But SomBhaskar of **The Last Labyrinth (1981)** portrays the spiritual alienation of a millionaire industrialist, Som, goes against the backdrop of a haunting world of life, love, God and death, **The Last Labyrinth**.

At the young age of twenty-five, SomBaskar becomes a millionaire, running plastic industry after the death of his father. He is a westernized Indian, a man of reason and technology, who does not take anything for granted without a sure evidence. He seems to inherit his doubts and his logical approach to life from his father, who has been a chemist turned businessman. His father has been fixated with the cause and effect theory. Som's father gets to melancholia that causes his death. His mother had died, as Som says, of "cancer and Krishna" (57).

Although Som's mother is aware of her fatal disease of cancer, she refuses to be hospitalized. He is tossed between the rationality of this father and spirituality of his mother. He is badly perplexed and seems to be unaware of the importance of human values in life and broods over his desire for possession. He philanders from one woman to another and keeps on grabbing

others companies intending to satisfy his discontented self; but instead of getting a sense of fulfillment he gets even more dissatisfied. His discontent turns into lust. He candidly admits, "I was a womanizer all right and a boozier, but my womanizing and boozing had not settled anything" (156).

LeelaSabnis, Som's lover, too, calls him "a neurotic. A compulsive fornicator"(80).Sabnis is a professor of psychology, well-versed in philosophy, supporter of women emancipation and an advocate of western free-love. Without any regret and hesitation, she declares that her husband has divorced her for reading too much. It is for the purpose of filling "the voids and the empty spaces, within and without" (47) that SomBaskar indulges with LeelaSabnis. He is suffering from delusions. She is surprised that a man "so successful, so intelligent, why should such a man be so confused" (79). She ponders that Som is facing the problem of alienation and identity. His possessive conduct all the time dominates his personality. He feels helpless to shake it off. Som - Leela affair lasts for six months only because, as Som puts it "LeelaSabnis analyzed too much" (78).

Som gets disappointed with Leela. He is looking for something else which Leela is unable to provide him with. He concludes that his affair with her as follows, "Why we fall apart .What I needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined" (82). It is at the age of thirty-five when Som, husband of an extraordinary woman and father of two children, first meets Aflab and Anuradha at the International Hotel in Delhi at a reception party for the Plastic Manufacturers Association organized by Aftab Rai, a feudal Banaras Zamindar.

Som's feeling is akin to that of Sindi who feels as if he were in his own tomb when he is in the midst of a crowd. He is a successful industrialist. At the same time he is extremely analytical and rational but not spiritual, but he has travelled far from his essential condition. He is a drinker and womanizer. It is almost a sickness in him to x-ray the flesh. That is why he is not ashamed of claiming the hands of another's man's wife.

Som cannot decide exactly what his problems are. He cannot love and he has only lust for things and persons. So, he becomes a foreigner to himself, to his soul, and an outsider to the psychic wholeness, like the other protagonists of Joshi. As a result, he does not know what he wants. It is true he does not know that Anuradha's love making like June Blyth's love-making in **The Foreigner**, is an attempt to inspire joy in others, and it is a sacrifice, not a sensual enjoyment.

Som feels that Gargi alone understands heard her presence, look and touch bring about a transformation in him and he tells her all his problems without any hesitation. Som fails to understand Anuradha rightly. He looks at her as a symbol of lust and he wants to possess her.

Som cannot understand that Anuradha is an embodiment of sacrifice and she lives for the happiness of others. Som's problems are the problem of all alienated persons residing in a highly mechanical society.

Arun Joshi's heroes are living in an era of rampant materialism and individualism, as a result of the enigmatic ways of life. Ratan is ambitious; he rolls in the filth of career and becomes

degenerated day by day. It deals with the alienation of a middle class civil servant of the Government of India. Som is bitten by the poisonous snakes of greed and lust. It portrays the alienation of a millionaire industrialist. He serves Mammon, and not God. So he suffers from the 'wants'. Their material prosperity, academic achievements and hedonistic life-style fail to lead them to a state of peace within and calm around, all these protagonists of Joshi, pursuit for self-identity in the enigmatic way of existentialism.

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