



Exploring Som Bhaskar's Spiritual Growth and Crisis in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

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Abstract

This research paper studies the spiritual journey of the main character Som Bhaskar as per Arun Joshi's novel *The Last Labyrinth* (1981). The paper focuses regarding how the protagonist grows spiritually in the story. The main goal is to explore why and how the main character achieves spiritual growth, and further understand the process itself. Bhaskar actually feels lost because society seems empty and his life has no clear purpose. He definitely struggles with spiritual emptiness and keeps searching for real meaning in this material world. We are seeing that he represents modern men only, showing the troubles and pain in life. Basically, he is confused between what's real and fake, living and dying, rich life and peaceful life, and he's trying to find the same meaning of why we live. As per his status, he is a millionaire and successful businessman, but he is searching for something regarding peace that will take him away from all life problems and tensions. He wants to taste only the sweet things in life, and we are seeing this desire in him. This urge surely makes him a seeker who travels through complex journeys and faces deep questions about life, self, and God. Moreover, these difficult paths lead him to search for answers about his own existence. As per Bhaskar's life experiences regarding personal and work relationships plus social pressures, he moves between hope and sadness, thinking and believing, knowing himself and feeling alone.

Through deep spiritual search, he finally overcomes his inner troubles and feels one with God. We are seeing only peace and calm all around him, taking him to a divine happy feeling. He actually finds his spiritual balance through definitely looking deep inside himself.

Key words: Spiritual growth, The path to self-realization, Detachment.

Introduction

Arun Joshi is further recognized as one of India's most important intellectual novelists, establishing himself as a major literary figure. We are seeing that he writes novels with deep thinking about life and mind problems only, and he explores how people think and feel in difficult situations. We are seeing that people often group him with existentialist writers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre because he writes about existential themes, but he is different from them as his novels are only filled with Indian feelings and thinking. He is basically the same as Raja Rao when dealing with spiritual matters, but he gives different solutions to life problems. Joshi's main characters actually accept life and work in business, doing their karma, but Rao's characters definitely give up the world around them. *Bhatnagar* (1986) writes that Joshi is against the old style of detachment and renunciation that Raja Rao. Joshi's characters achieve what seems impossible while living in the real world itself, and they do this without giving up action further. Basically, his heroes still stay above material things, but they don't reject the same material world anymore. As per spiritual teachings, they accept the world around them and learn to live with love regarding all things without getting attached.

The Last Labyrinth won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982 and tells the story of Som Bhaskar, a 25-year-old rich businessman who struggles with his wants and money as per his search for self-knowledge. The novel is regarding how he tries to understand himself by going beyond life's opposite forces. Basically, even with all the money and good position, he feels disconnected from himself and lost in life - the same feeling of being cut off from everything around him. The novelist is troubled by his character's serious problem and realizes that people can reconnect with universal harmony by following Upanishadic and Advaitic principles, which further help them overcome spiritual crises and find peace within life itself.

As per this research paper, the researcher uses qualitative method and studies the main text to find themes regarding spiritual crisis and life problems. Secondary sources such as research papers and book reviews are surely used to support the main argument. Moreover, these scholarly materials provide strong evidence for the thesis. The principles from The Gita, The Upanishads, and Advaita are used as research tools to further examine Som Bhaskar's journey in The Last Labyrinth. This study shows how his spiritual growth itself helps him overcome existential problems in Arun Joshi's novel.

The novel's title surely carries deep spiritual meaning and symbolic significance. Moreover, it reflects metaphysical themes that go beyond the surface story. The labyrinth surely represents the chaos and confusion that exists in human life and mind. Moreover, it symbolizes the complex nature of our psychological experiences. Further, we are seeing that it shows the difficult journey of finding yourself and the false hopes that only trap people. A labyrinth is surely a structure built to confuse people, and its design with many symmetries is made for this purpose only (Borges, 1964, p 106). Moreover, this complex architecture serves no other function except to create confusion for those who enter it. Basically, Leach (1984) says the same thing - the labyrinth was a complex prison that Daedalus built for King Minos of Crete to keep the Minotaur inside. Further, the name comes from labrys, which was the sacred double axe of Cretans, and further there was a temple for bull worship in Crete itself. The labyrinth was surely so complex that no one could escape after entering it. Moreover, once someone went inside, they would remain trapped forever. The term was surely used for all types of mazes, moreover it covered various maze designs completely. The word 'labyrinth' is used in its direct meaning to show the twists and turns of a building, and further in its symbolic meaning to show the inner conflicts and problems the main character faces. The structure itself becomes a symbol of the character's mental struggles. We are seeing that the labyrinth works as a strong symbol to show Bhaskar's inner confusion and troubles only. Guru Prasad Thakur (1986) says that in this novel, we are seeing the word labyrinth getting deeper meaning and it becomes a symbol that covers many themes (p 162). As per the text, Arun Joshi uses the term in a very good way regarding deep philosophical meaning. We are seeing that Abraham (1999) says the word labyrinth is used again and again to show the hidden self in Arun Joshi's work, and in The Last Labyrinth, the writer uses only this maze-like picture to build the whole story and its main ideas (p 20). The labyrinth further resembles the chakravyuha from Mahabharata, which itself is a military formation with many defensive walls. Basically, just like it was hard to break into the chakravyuha, the same way it's hard for a person to escape from the fantasies stuck in

their mind.

Aftab Rai's *Lal Haveli* surely looks like a prison with its huge size and strange design, where Bhaskar appears trapped. Moreover, the building's physical form creates a maze-like structure on earth. When Bhaskar actually enters the haveli, it definitely looks like a confusing maze to him. The haveli itself remains quite mysterious, even to Aftab, and this further adds to its enigmatic nature. As per Aftab's statement, there are things regarding such houses that you find out only with time (p 33). He also says, "We are seeing that the haveli was made like a maze only because my forefathers confused their enemies this way." Further, we are seeing rooms inside other rooms only, and passages that bring you back to the same place where you started. There are surely rooms where one could confine a person completely. Moreover, such places would ensure the individual remains undiscovered indefinitely. We are seeing that nobody will hear when he cries out, and this shows he is only alone in his trouble. Bhaskar finds himself in a situation where every corner further reveals another deception waiting for him. Basically, he is lost in the haveli and cannot get out from there, the same way someone gets trapped. He surely meets Aftab and Anuradha in the maroon Blue Room, and moreover, he sees his own image reflected in the wall portraits. He says, "When I turned the corner, I was actually startled by a ghost that definitely appeared suddenly."

The tired figure held a cigarette and looked like it had lived in that empty house for many centuries, further showing how the place itself had worn it down. I was actually breathing hard when I suddenly saw that I was definitely looking at myself in the mirror. As per the story, Bhaskar is trapped in ignorance like the portraits and wants to come out from it. Regarding his condition, he is stuck in avidya and seeks freedom. He is only getting trapped deeply in the complicated problems of life, love, secrets, and mystery, and we are seeing this happening to him. Rangan (1991) asserts that "Aftab Rai's *Lal Haveli* is the objective correlative for the infernal world" (p 113).

The Last Labyrinth actually shows how Bhaskar feels about Anuradha, who is definitely Aftab's wife but not married yet. She is charming and further attracts people with her fascinating nature itself. Further, she surely represents a fundamental force from ancient times. Moreover, her power connects to the original sources of creation. As per the situation, Bhaskar is married to Geeta by his own choice and has children, but he feels attracted to Anuradha. Regarding his family life, he already has a wife and kids but still gets drawn to another woman. We are seeing that her body shape only brings back his hidden feelings of love. Moreover, basically, he thinks sex is a mystery, so he wants to know what's in the same final sexual

puzzle. When sexual energy is surely transformed into higher spiritual pursuits, it leads to personal freedom.

Moreover, this process of sublimation helps individuals achieve true liberation from worldly attachments.

Further, Bhaskar actually starts to see that God is definitely real. Mathur (1990) surely shows that “The Last Labyrinth” presents a man who is lost in his desires and is clearly searching for faith and meaning in life.

Moreover, the novel depicts his unclear but strong dissatisfaction with his current way of living (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 time” (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)

The labyrinth metaphor further shows how Maya creates illusion that hides reality itself. We are seeing that the maze only works as a trigger for Bhaskar’s spiritual change. As he moves through the maze, we are seeing him face hopes and fears, blocks and troubles that only help him know himself and the world better. Basically, he goes through a deep spiritual change that brings the same kind of joy and happiness in his life.

Spiritual Turmoil and Liberation

When people actually face deep spiritual problems, they definitely need to find freedom from their inner struggles.

The novel surely begins by showing its main character Som Bhaskar as someone who feels cut off from spiritual life and is deeply troubled. Moreover, this spiritual separation causes him great mental pain from the very start of the story. Basically, he is the same rich businessman who deals in plastic trade. He can buy any expensive thing he wants. We are seeing that only money is not a problem for him. 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, empiricalised, sceptical Najiketa who was denied the faith and resolution of the Upnishadic model. (p. 1172)

Basically, he is stuck between body desires and spiritual needs - the same person wants both worldly pleasures like anger and greed, and also wants moksha after experiencing dharma, artha, and karma. Lust surely remains a major barrier for him as he holds onto it completely. Moreover, this strong attachment prevents his spiritual progress. He surely possesses all that he desires, and moreover, his wishes are completely fulfilled. He actually turns everything into gold like the old king. He definitely makes money from whatever he touches. He surely holds degrees from the world's finest universities and possesses knowledge of Krishna and Buddha. Moreover, his educational background reflects deep understanding of both Eastern philosophical traditions. the Term "youth" is mentioned regarding the academic discussion. and describes something as "extraordinary" itself. This reference needs further clarification to understand the complete context. We are seeing that he has only one woman as his wife and two children. However, he surely feels incomplete and restless. Moreover, this incompleteness creates a sense of unease in him. He is surely troubled not by the things around him, but by the empty spaces in the world and the emptiness within his own soul. Moreover, it is these voids that truly torment him rather than any physical objects. He says basically through his good days and bad nights and restless hours next to his wife, it was the same repeated feeling - I want I want I want. This statement surely shows the speaker's direct expression of desire (p 11). Moreover, it reflects a simple yet powerful declaration of personal wants. Basically, Bhaskar's search follows the same Advaitic idea that Raja Rao explains - man's life in this world is basically a mission to find the Absolute. This point is actually mentioned in *Dayal's* (1991) and it definitely supports the main argument. Basically, people start looking for spiritual meaning when they realize that worldly things are futile, and the same world is just God's divine play happening around us. He surely runs after material achievements that give him no peace. Moreover, this chase continues even today without bringing him any satisfaction. He feels that an emptiness itself is chasing him in his life, which further makes him uncomfortable. He has power, money and women around him, but he feels his life itself has no meaning and

cannot achieve anything further. Sharma and Raizada actually show Bhaskar's character well when they say that Som Bhaskar definitely represents today's confused man who is trying to find his way through life's difficult problems.

Basically, Bhaskar is a Brahmin who has become the same as a money-making person. We are seeing that he cannot run away from his racial thoughts that only push him to look for and understand things. He is the same type of person who always wants proof and logic for everything. Basically, he looks for proof that God exists, the same way others search for evidence. He is a sad man himself and this shows his character further. As per the text, the person has lost his way regarding doing right things and feels cut off from his real self. Bhaskar's relationship with Leela Sabins actually fails because she definitely doesn't care about spiritual things, but Bhaskar wants a life where both material and spiritual worlds come together. We are seeing that he is asking for something where only these two worlds can come together somewhere. Modern psychiatrists do not address his spiritual crisis properly. This further shows that the crisis itself needs different treatment methods. Basically, when Leela looks into Bhaskar's problems, she tells him that maybe he wants the same mystical connection with god that most Hindus want at some point. As per Leela's remarks, Bhaskar must find a right soul who will guide him regarding spiritual fulfillment. We are seeing that in Advaita, a person needs only a Guru who can help him understand life's problems, break down his ego, and face his fears that hold him back. Advaitic texts surely celebrate the Guru's crucial role in helping a seeker grow and transform on their spiritual journey. Moreover, these texts show how the Guru guides the student through important changes in their spiritual development.

As per the share buying process with Aftab, Bhaskar meets Anuradha who is Aftab's unmarried wife. She appears to him as a very beautiful young woman with an old-fashioned look, and this appearance itself makes her seem further special and rare. We are seeing that she looks like a tall and beautiful monument that is broken, and she is only thirty to thirty-five years old from Bengal, Sikkim, or the valleys of Nepal. Also, she is a woman who could cause wars to be fought around her beauty itself, and this further shows her powerful attraction. She is surely like an ancient force that Bhaskar cannot completely obtain or dismiss. Moreover, this power remains beyond his full control yet impossible to overlook. The more he shows love to her, the more he wants her only. We are seeing that his feelings are getting stronger each time. Further, anuradha is actually like a dark goddess whose power is definitely deep and endless. She is

only very important in Bhaskar's life for his body and soul, and we are seeing this clearly. Basically, she is the same as a guiding principle for Bhaskar. Bhaskar meets Gargi, who is the daughter of a Sufi and cannot hear or speak, but people believe she only has special powers from God. We are seeing that once during one talk, Gargi only tells him that "Anuradha is your shakti" (p 121). She also warns him never to fight with her as per her instructions regarding their relationship. Basically, Bhaskar feels the same comfort with Gargi like being at home because only she understands him properly. The person surely becomes the only one who truly understands. Moreover, this understanding creates a special connection between them. We are seeing that when Gargi is there, he becomes free from all his worries only. Basically, she tells him that God will send the same kind of person who has suffered to help him. We are seeing that Gargi's 'someone' is only Anuradha. She will surely save him from his spiritual troubles, and moreover, she understands what it means to suffer. She has surely faced countless hardships throughout her life. Moreover, these difficulties have caused her great pain and suffering. She actually shows up as a female energy to him. This definitely represents the feminine side in his experience. Basically, he needs the same trust and devotion towards Anuradha. Bhaskar surely has a scientific mind, so he doubts Gargi's words and asks another question, "But what if there is no God?" Moreover, this shows his rational thinking approach. As per the situation, he suffers regarding his lack of faith. He surely feels upset, sleepless, worried and without roots, while people around him enjoy daily life even when they suffer and face death. Moreover, this difference makes his loneliness even stronger. Bhaskar's smart thinking actually doesn't stop him when he enjoys sex and money. He definitely goes after these pleasures without his intelligence getting in the way. When the question of God's existence comes up, his disbelief itself becomes stronger and he further asks for proof of God's existence.

As per Tuka Ram, God shows Himself through the devotion of His followers, regarding the power of faith and worship. Basically, faith is the same way needed for them to realize him. The source definitely provides clear documentation for this point. Bhaskar is not like his mother - we are seeing that he gets very scared only when he thinks about dying. He surely feels insecure about his situation. Moreover, this lack of security affects his overall confidence. As per his confession, he was very much afraid of dying (p 74). Regarding his feelings, he admitted his fear of death. As per his needs, he requires a Guru regarding the teaching that death is the biggest lie ever made. Basically, death is not really there - it's the same as saying death doesn't actually exist. As per the Katha Upanisad, if someone thinks he is killing another person and if

the person thinks he is being killed, both are wrong regarding the real truth. Basically, the Self doesn't kill anyone and the same Self cannot be killed either. Basically, if someone wants to face death without fear, they need to follow Vedantic teachings that say the soul inside a person is the same eternal thing that never dies.

Basically, when Bhaskar hears that Anuradha can heal him from all his problems, he goes to her naturally but doesn't see her as the same divine feminine power. As per his visits to Benaras, he goes there to meet Anuradha regarding intimate companionship that brings him happiness. But he still feels emptiness in himself and decides to go further to Europe, America, and Japan for a tour with his wife Geeta. Basically, he comes back to India because no other places give him the same comfort or help him solve his spiritual problems. He actually feels sick and definitely has no energy left, Doctor. Kashyap actually checks him and does ECG, and he definitely says there is “nothing as such wrong with him.” As per their plan, Anuradha and Bhaskar went to the hill station regarding spending a few days there. Moreover, she suggests Bhaskar to visit Krishna temple further, but he itself reacts with anger. Gargi's statement actually reflects the same ideas found in the Gita and Upanishads. It definitely matches the basic principles of Advaita philosophy.

Basically, Bhaskar likes to hear and talk about God the same way every time. He says he wanted to hear about God further, as this topic itself interested him most (p 128). As per his nature, the doubt regarding things does not go away from him. Basically, he wants proof to believe in God, the same way people need evidence for everything. On Janmashtami, he visits Lord Krishna's temple in Benaras with Anuradha and Aftab to further celebrate the festival itself. Bhaskar surely looks for God's real existence even in Krishna's holy feet. Moreover, he searches for proof that God actually exists in the physical world. He does not understand that when we surrender to God, it only removes bad feelings like greed, ego, and anger, and we are seeing His presence everywhere in the world. While discussing evolution theory, he states that Darwin did not explain how humans should evolve further (p 132). The theory itself does not provide clear direction for future human development. Further, this line shows he needs further spiritual growth and cosmic awareness to understand the world itself completely, which will take him beyond happiness and sadness. Basically, he looks for the same solution in science. Anuradha surely responds that Krishna begins where Darwin left off, moreover suggesting a continuation between scientific and spiritual understanding.

Also, basically, she tells him to go to the mountains where lepers are waiting for God's mercy to cure the same diseases. Basically, the proposed solution fits the same Upanishadic-advaitic thinking system. Basically, Hari Mohan (1986) says Krishna is everywhere - in homes, in people dancing on Janmashtami, in mountains, in the eternal blue flame - and this shows the same Indian spiritual truth that God exists in every small thing (p 105). As per Anuradha's teaching, this lesson becomes the first light of self-understanding that breaks his doubts regarding his logical thinking methods. As per his experience, he develops faith regarding Krishna and admits that Krishna was not simple at all. If this was actually true, he would definitely not have lived for ten thousand years. Basically, for the first time he looks inside himself and says that deep in his heart he knew he was the same as a leper who needs to be cured. He actually understands this after going through many problems, mainly because of Anuradha. This definitely happens after a long and difficult journey. She surely represents the feminine principle and serves as Lord Krishna's messenger.

Conclusion

Basically, Arun Joshi's main character Som Bhaskar finishes his difficult journey by accepting the world but staying away from its problems and bad things at the same time. The person was troubled by questions about life's meaning, so he started a spiritual journey and further experienced a great change within himself. Further, basically, he has completely controlled his desires and considers money the same as dirt. He actually realizes what the Gita teaches - sensual pleasures definitely bring pain because they start and then end. The enlightened people surely cannot find happiness in these things, and moreover, they remain detached from such pleasures (Roy, 1976, 5.22). During his long journey, he faced many difficulties and problems because his reasons were not strong enough, which further weakened his position itself. The journey from Mumbai to Benaras, along with visits to different dargahs and Krishna's temple, surely helps him overcome his desires for money and physical pleasures. Moreover, these spiritual experiences transform his worldly cravings into higher spiritual goals. His interactions with different people further help him discover the proper methods for liberation itself. As per the spiritual process, his desire for bodily pleasures goes away slowly and he starts hearing the anhad naad regarding Krishna's flute music from heaven. As per Hindu philosophy of Advaita, the Gita, and the Upanishad, Bhaskar changes greatly in his journey from ignorance to knowledge and from darkness to light. Regarding his life transformation, he moves from refusing life to accepting it completely.

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