

The Factual Vision of Indian Philosophy in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

Thore Dhanaji Vithalrao

Shri Chhatrapati Shivaji College, Omerga

Dr Yashwant A. Doke

Tuljabhavani Mahavidyalaya, Tuljapur

Abstract:

Arun Joshi was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award for his fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth* published in 1981 which is one of the finest novels in Indian Literature in English. It deals with a philosophical theme and only a refined novelist like Joshi can take up such an impenetrable topic that demands a lot of deliberation, surveillance and indepth analysis. By juxtaposing the needs of the body and the spirit, he paves the way to comprehend the eventual truth. Joshi's greatness lies in presenting the two sides of the reality by being unprejudiced and non interment till the end. Joshi maintains the balance by giving equal importance to contextualized descriptions and meaningful dialogues according to the situation. The Last Labyrinth is an extension of what he has been trying to transmit from his very first novel. Arun Joshi emphasises on the role of the society and human relations in reforming an individual and his philosophical attitude towards the society.

Keywords: Philosophy, Identity, Astrology, Indian Literature.

The corporeal action of the novel takes place in Delhi, Bombay and Banaras. Along with the outer action, the novelist presents the internal drama being enacted in the consciousness of Som, the protagonist. The Last Labyrinth presents a conflict between the opposite forces like ethical and unethical, moral and immoral and amorous and spiritual. Som's successful entrepreneurship makes him a millionaire at an early age of twenty five. The idiosyncrasy in his life is indicated by his irregular sleeping hours of three to ten in the morning and four to six in the evening. Both the hunger of the body and spirit had left Som's body and blood with

full of chemicals. In all likelihood Som might have got this addiction for carnal pleasures. He had mistresses who were young cinema actresses. Incidentally Som's mistress Anuradha is also a sort of an actress.

Som's father is unlike his grandfather is neither a womanizer nor a boozier. He is a scientist and therefore believed in science. After his wife's death his interests shifted to subjects as varied as *Yagnavalkya* (Yajnavalkya (Sanskrit: यज्ञवल्क्य, Yājñavalkya) of Videha (fl. c. 7th century BCE) was a *rishi* and philosopher of Vedic India) to Astronomy. He started watching stars with a telescope and even had an astronomer's camera. But his science did not provide him with answers to some of the fundamental questions that disturbed him thoroughly. Som spoke in a condescending manner patronizing his own father who was bent upon knowing the truth, the truth of the origin of the universe. Though Som had done a paper on religion at Harvard, even he does not have any readymade answer to offer to his father when he raises a volley of questions from a sacred text:

Who knows the truth? Who can tell whence and how arose the universe. The Gods are later than its beginning. Who knows, therefore whence comes this creation? Only that God who sees in highest heaven; He only knows whence came this universe. He only knows Or, perhaps, He knows not. What do you make of this?

Som's father was depressed with the vagueness of the philosophical profundities. As Som was young at that time he did not care much for his father's disappointment with the configuration of the universe. Som definitely, was not interested in the 'light of the *Yagnavalkya*.'

When Som was small he must have enjoyed a special relationship with his mother because, when he goes up the mountains in search of shares, he is reminded of several summers spent on similar mountains. In the first place she did not believe it was cancer. She consulted astrologers and quacks, who lied to her and robbed her of thousands of rupees. She was a great believer in Krishna and so flushed out all the tablets down the toilet. All efforts of Som to move her to a hospital failed. Such was her faith in God. But Krishna did not intervene and she died. This event makes someone aware about the message of BHAGVAD GEETA as knowing that Krishna is an Omni-benevolent God means that he is not somewhere up there, causing the problem; he is in here, next to us in our own hearts, wanting to help us deal with

it. The Gita (13.23) indicates that HE is the overseer and sanctioner. HE is not the reason for the problem; HE is the refuge from it – the source of our strength to live with it and the source of our intelligence to find a solution to it. Her death caused an irreparable damage to Som's psyche. He could not get over his mother's death. A noted critic, Sanjay Narasimhaiah points out, "The manner in which his mother died was the turning point in Som's life. It changed his entire mental make-up, his very attitude to life. He kept back not tears but a great roaring hollowness. What angers him more is the way his mother died than death itself."

Gita, like any other traditional faithful Hindu wife, bears with Som's idiosyncrasies and hallucinations very patiently and stands by him, in the hour of need, like a pillar. One wonders at the way Gita maintains her equanimity, when Som tells her that he has been carrying on with Anuradha. Her reaction is equally dignified when Som learns about Anuradha's letter to Gita and rebukes almost in a foul language which is unbecoming of an educated husband. She suddenly develops an interest in *Sadhus* and astrologers to whom Usha Bande has a conceivable answer that, we, however, do not know what Gita thinks of her husband's whims and fancies. But, though we are not told, we can construe, from occasional actions or remarks that beneath her silent acceptance there is a woman deeply distressed. Her religious beliefs become a source of strength and nourishment for her. It is clearly evident in her pleadings, when she tries to persuade K to accompany Som, who plans to go to the mountains in search of Anuradha's shares. A. N. Dwivedi is full of praise when he says,

"Gita has, been enduring and tolerant. Gita is the only remedy for a sick brain like that of Som Bhaskar, and by identifying with her he can realise true hope and peace. It is the implied significance of her name – Gita as though suggesting directly the philosophical treatise of the Hindus!"

K is a witness to most important and mysterious incidents in the novel. He relates how one night Aftab ran up from Banaras asking him to help Anuradha who was very ill in Bombay. K finds her in the bath-tub with her wrists cut. How Aftab knew it remains a mystery. Again one sees him in the mountains asking Gargi if she had really saved Som, from death bed, on the request of Anuradha. Though K does not believe in miracles, he does not completely rule it out, like Som, as a 'gimmick'. In Usha Bande's understanding there is significance to K's character when she remarks,

“He appears a mythical figure till we learn that he is *Kashyap*. The initial ‘K’ makes sufficient impact as it denotes Krishna. Som, dangling between ‘K’ and Krishna also vacillates between belief and non belief and suffers voids and empty spaces which frighten him.”

As he is patient and friendly with every one, Som’s father rightly calls him ‘a man for all seasons.’ Gargi the deaf-mute God-woman is the daughter of a Sufi, *pir* (*Pir* is a title for a Sufi master or spiritual guide equally used in the *nath* tradition). Her father lived with Aftab’s father. He was the one who had given Aftab his sight. Like Anuradha, Gargi’s grandfather also had bartered his own life, with God, to save his son’s lie. Som visits her many times. He thinks she has a wonderful smile. Som feels that she is the only one who can understand what goes on in his mind. She assures Som that God will send someone, who knows suffering, to help him. “All of them—As they surrender unto Me—I reward accordingly. Everyone follows My path in all respects, O son of Prtha [Arjuna].” (Bhagavad-Gita 4.11) And the mysterious recovery of Som from death-bed could also be an unseen act of Gargi. When Som seeks answers and evidence for a number of questions related to God’s existence, Gargi always with a smile answers that there is no harm in believing that God exists. If one keeps aside one’s doubts, whether she can really perform miracles, and just looks at the simple act of, none other than a person like, Som himself touching her feet, one can understand the greatness and importance given by the novelist to Gargi. It might look a bit exaggerating but Hari Mohan Prasad is right in his own way when he remarks that,

“She can be omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. She has transcended the limits of time and space.”

The turbulent and disturbing scenes of Banaras reflect the disturbances in Bhaskar’s soul. Banaras evokes thoughts of *Dharmna*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*. Both Hindu and Buddhist *dharmas* have been preached there. Bhaskar first goes there to negotiate the shares of Aftab Rai and gets involved in Anuradha. He is sucked deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of life, love, intrigue and mystery.

Som’s fornicating rules of ‘one-shot’ obsession and not being able to ‘go to the same woman twice’ are set aside in Anuradha’s case. T. K. Ghosh rightly remarks, Som is a Westernized Indian who is devoid of any faith in the religious beliefs of his community. With his spiritual

homelessness and loss of faith, he is given to pragmatism and rationalism which, in turn, lead him to an impasse of intellectual doubt and anxiety. Though there can be no doubt about the genuineness of Som's search, one feels that his approach is wrong.

The Labyrinths are meaningful and imply a total explanation: or to put it in a different way, they put one into focus with oneself. Voids may not be meaningless, but are at best half truths. In Joshi's text 'Labyrinth' earns the status of a metaphor for the various levels of consciousness immanent in the Lord Krishna legend. In the texts of Borges and Durrell labyrinths are voids emerging out of insatiable human thirst to know and vindicate oneself.

Bhaskar, whose neuro problems are older than the psychiatry itself, spends a lot of money on his soul searching obsessions. According to a psychiatrist Som's soul might, "imagine that his wants, desires are best met through another soul, if that soul is the right one. That, no doubt, is a big if. Until he meets this right soul there is no peace. When you meet the right soul then, of course, things might be peaceful, may even move on towards a higher goal." As Som thinks that Anuradha is his soul mate, he keeps going to her repeatedly. While he is in Bombay, looking at a grill on a wall, for no reason, he thinks:

"There was a mystery about Anuradha that I had yet to crack ... why should she appear mysterious unless, possibly, there was a mystery within me that, in her proximity, got somehow stirred, as one tuning fork might stir another. They go to *dargahs*, temples and fairs."

Sometimes Som tells Gita that he is going to Delhi and takes instead a Right straight to Banaras.

Arun Joshi presents Anuradha's character in an enigmatic way. When Som, Anuradha and Aftab have a long debate on the evolution of man and spirit, in the presence of Gargi, Anuradha cleverly points out that Krishna takes over from where Darwin left off. It is unlikely that Som could be really interested in such things. He admits boldly,

I wasn't interested in Darwin or Krishna, or the spirit of the Cro-Magnons. All I wanted was her. I wanted her body and soul, every bit of her.

Sorn tries to hurt Anuradha, with certain derogatory remarks, regarding her faithfulness to Aftab, though she had told him, in no uncertain terms, not to make fun of her. She likes to

live in Lal Haveli with Aftab and Gargi. She agrees, in spite of herself, to go to Bombay, with Som. She even believes that whatever is happening between them is 'bound to happen' and the whole thing is 'pre-destined'. Anuradha exhibits a tremendous sense of tolerance and forbearance which is typical of a traditional Hindu woman. After dropping Anuradha at her aunt's house Som goes home and falls down with a massive heart attack. There was no hope of surviving. In K's language, he was ninety nine percent dead. Anuradha visited him and went back straight to Gargi. She begged, persisted and threatened that she would end her life by consuming poison if anything happened to Som. Finally Gargi must have conceded to save Som on one condition that Anuradha should give up Som forever. True love demands sacrifice. Anuradha has the ability not only to sacrifice but also to strengthen those who are in distress. Anuradha writes to Gita and asks her forgiveness. She also informs that she won't be seeing Som anymore. Gita must have been greatly relieved by that letter.

Som thoroughly misunderstands Anuradha and, as a vengeance, starts buying Aftab's shares again. Probably Anuradha anticipated this and left her shares in the peaks, with a hope that Som would, one day, visit the temple, at least on this pretext, and learn something from Lord Krishna. Som for all the confusion and chaos in his life finds fault with his grandfather and father, because their afflictions were bestowed upon him. He believes that the same afflictions have led him into 'unbearable entanglements'. Anuradha in her relentless efforts to bring him under the protection of Krishna sends him a silver statue of Krishna, through Aftab, with a note that he should always keep it with him. She had got it from Gargi. V. Rangan rightly comments, there is something fascinating about Anuradha. She is like a primordial power whom Bhaskar could neither resist nor possess wholly. She seems to be an embodiment of ShaMi and the novel turns out to be Bhaskar's mad pursuit of that power, because he thinks that his search is tied up with her.

In Som's opinion nothing should be taken for granted. Everything should be reasoned out. Usually children challenge everything and demand for proof, because they do not believe anything blindly. His contention is that, if God can hold shares, why can't He have some evidence of His existence. The boy, whom Som meets on his way to the temple, also plays a symbolic role in his life. Som, to his surprise, finds Gargi waiting for him with the shares, in

the mountains. After receiving the shares, Som simply rejects the idea of God and, as usual, demands Gargi that,

“He must have evidence... I cannot give up Anuradha, you know that. In the absence of evidence I intend to take not only these shares but also Anuradha.”

The question of Som’s faith remains suspended in the air like his father’s. In the end Som’s western education and thinking do not permit him to get convinced of the value of the Indian spiritual flame without form. Whether it is God or Anuradha he wants to feel and possess bodily. He is totally unlike Ratan of *The Apprentice* who attends a funeral, with the full honours of a military band but without the body. Som’s search continues. In Devinder Mohan’s view,

“Anuradha’s death indicates that the presence of God as an incarnation, in the form of Krishna, can be sought in the fleshly and material existence only if man seeks it selflessly rather than chases it blindly for a harvest of his fortune.”

Even if Som does not succeed in his search he has an understanding wife , Gita, to fall back. After Anuradha’s disappearance it is quite, but, natural that one, along with Som, feels that Anuradha was a special person with angelic qualities. Som acknowledges, It was as though she had been gifted with a special vision, a vantage point high above the earth, from where she could see the melee below as ordinary men could not. And it was as though the vision always left her sadder, taking away from her the hope and the laughter with which she had been born. “Anuradha is one of the finest characters, of Joshi, that has ever been created in Indian Literature in English. When she disappears, forever, one feels a great pathos, somewhere deep down in one’s heart, a feeling of great sadness, a feeling similar to the loss of one’s dearest ones. Such is her impact on the minds of her sympathizers. Joshi had a clear purpose in creating Anuradha’s character. He says that, “Anuradha’s role in the novel is to lead Bhaskar through the subconscious. Then he loses her. After wading through the intricately intriguing experiences of the two ill-fated lovers, one arrives at an inference that Arun Joshi has taken all these pains to prove the old adage that one is not given anything unless, first, one sacrifices something.

References:

1. Arun Joshi: *The Last Labyrinth*, Delhi ,Orient Paperbacks, 1981

2. Ben-Ami Scharfstein (1998), *A comparative history of world philosophy: from the Upanishads to Kant*, Albany: State University of New York Press
3. Devinder Mohan: "Beyond the Litany of Wants: Contexts of Arun Joshi's Fiction Towards *The Last Labyrinth*"; *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980Js*, Viney Kirpal, Delhi, Allied, 1990
4. Dwivedi: "The Novels of Arun Joshi, A Critical Study", *Studies in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English*, Allahabad, Kitab Mahal, 1987
5. P. Saxena: "The Image of Labyrinth in Borges, Durrell and Joshi": *Indo - English Fiction*, New Delhi, Johnson's Publications Vol - 111, 1985
6. Rekha Rani: "The Language of the Dreams in *The Last Labyrinth*", *The Novel of Arun Joshi*, ed. R.K.Dhawan, Delhi, Prestige, 1992
7. Usha Bande: "Awn Joshi's Women: An Asoteric Experience", *Women in Indo-Anglian Fiction*, Jalandhar, ABS Publications, 1997