

## Women Characters in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* – A Prototype of Values

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### Abstract

Indian English writers in the post-independence period have made an effort to address themselves to a Western audience and have a desire to define and interpret the East for its benefit. In the process, they rediscovered their country and their own special characteristics. Progress of the West lies in its materialism, but the crowning glory of the East is its spiritual achievement. Arun Joshi tried to view with serenity the challenges of contrasting cultures through the women characters. There is a sharp contrast between the women of traditional society and modern materialistic society. The present paper aims to discuss transversal values of two worlds through women characters in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*.

**Key Words** World, Rationalism, Faith, Spiritual, Reality

### Introduction

Arun Joshi is one of the most eminent Indian English novelists. His novel *The Last Labyrinth* is matchless in the treatment of Indian ethos through his women characters. *The Last Labyrinth* is a reflection of the contemporary phase of the dilemma of modern man who is essentially turbulent groping through the labyrinths of life, existence and reality. There are two worlds in this novel- the western world of science and rationalism, and Indian world of faith and transcendentalism. The novel juxtaposes rationality and faith, reality and dreams, materialism and spirituality through women characters. Bombay is pitted against Banaras and the restlessness of SomBhaskar with his relentless cry of 'I want I want' against the relaxed lifestyle of AftabRai whose gloomy sensuous den, Lal Haveli, is the starting point where SomBhaskar's obsession with labyrinths of various kinds begins. He gets fascinated by an obsolete world, decaying yet urbane- the world of Anuradha and Aftab - and by labyrinth of the Haveli they inhabit.

### Encounter with Labyrinths

Anuradha meets Som for the first time in a Delhi hotel at a reception organised by AftabRai for the Plastic Manufacturers Association. Som is irresistibly drawn towards her. The quaint house in which she lives with a lover strikes him as being grotesquely Labyrinthine. It is AftabRai who had invited him to Banaras and when Som visits him at his residence Lal Haveli, he feels that 'it was a maze that we were moving through. Perhaps; the entire haveli had been built as a maze'.

It is darkly attractive Anuradha who casts a spell on Som. He is bewildered by her charm: "she was not self-conscious about her body of whose grace and sensuousness she seemed unaware." Indeed Anuradha, Haveli and its owner AftabRai represent antiquity and are a mystery, labyrinth to the rational mind of Som.

It may be argued that in a moralistic discourse the most gruesome situation in the structure of civilization is represented by the narrative is Bhaskar's marriage to Geeta. Bhaskar, considering his own embarrassing deviations, frankly recognizes that Geeta too has every right to the adulteries of the body, "though she has only taken to cleaning of the soul". In accepting the position of the insignificant other and her husband's affairs with other women, Geeta has patronized her husband's lustful indulgences, recognising at the same time her pathetic helplessness and self-deprecation. She is known of her husband's affair with Anuradha; in fact during her husband's illness Geeta and Anuradha had jointly prayed for his recovery. While Geeta suffers and preserves through her husband's womanizing and boozing Anuradha gets the upper hand in dealing with Aftab and Bhaskar. Although Gargi has called Anuradha, Bhaskar's shakti, Bhaskar rightly calls her "his dark and terrible love".

It is of course true that Anuradha electrifies, vivifies and controls Bhaskar's life, thus enabling Bhaskar to know his subconscious self. Bhaskar's unconquerable desire for Anuradha and Anuradha's own sexuality are

paradigmatic much more in the Freudian sense and the Jungian sense of the enigma than in the Indian sense of the shakti .The mythical-poetical world of Lal Haveli with its mysterious spaces and labyrinths, remains illusory to the scientific-rational mind of Bhaskar , but it is undoubtedly Anuradha who with her evocative physicality and sexuality is the principal creator of illusion. One would surmise that Bhaskar's complete and perfect union with Anuradha could have given him spiritual wholeness, the state in which sexual anxiety and spiritual consciousness are fully integrated. But in this complex psychoanalytical- theological argument Anuradha remains merely Bhaskar's projection. As Bhaskar acknowledges somewhat, helplessly:"There was more to her than met the eye.A world was spinning all by itself. I was infatuated with this mysterious world." Confined in this world of Maya, Bhaskar has totally lost the focus and astuteness of his own vision and will. Nevertheless, Anuradha's sudden and unceremonial disappearance from the narrative, Geeta's dehumanized existence and LeelaSabnis's liberated rationalism are a commentary on the social order of which SomBhaskar is a tragic product. Bhaskar's lust for Anuradha has not changed into his love.Bhaskar's anxiety, fear and pain, restricting from his own mental and emotional fragmentation are clearly echoed in these lines: "Anuradha, if there is it God and if you have met Him and if he is willing to listen, then, Anuradha my soul, tell Him, tell this God,to have mercy upon me. Tell Him I am weary of so many fears;so much doubting of this dark Earth and these empty heavens."

### **Transversal Values**

Anuradha exercises such an overpowering fascination over Som that he neglects his business, his family and his health in an effort to win her. He makes frequent trips to Banaras and is determined to obtain her for himself, her soul and body. And Geeta, his own wife, is all that a wife could be - trusting, beautiful and well-bred. She knows tremendous loyalty and courage in standing by him despite his unreliable conduct. And yet Som is drawn into an agonising, painful obsessive love for Anuradha. Som says: "What I needed perhaps was something, somewhere in which the two worlds combined." When Bhaskar meets Geeta, it is only her faith in life that attracts him towards her. "If discontent is my trademark, trust is Geeta's... Geeta trusts like birds fly, like fish swim".Bhaskar believes that he is in a happy marriage and he cannot imagine a life without Geeta and yet he is engaged in fornications. He attracts again and again to different women. All his life Som seeks someone who has ability to resolve the conflicts of his life. He does not find it in his wife, nor in LeelaSabnis, the clever young professor. Leela is an embodiment of reason and tries to explain Som's sickness through analysis. Leela symbolises the scientific attitude. Bhaskar is attracted towards her charm of analysis and explanation. Though he has sexual relationship with her for six months, yet is still bewildered with her: "She analysed like others breathe. If we are talking of compulsions, there was a woman who had compulsions- to talk, to analyse. There was nothing that she could not work out through cool analysis: the universe, the living and the dead, worlds seen and unseen."

Leela explains and analyses, but she has little knowledge about "the roots of the world's confusion". Bhaskar tells her about his hollowness and the voices that he hears all the time. She analyses his problem but can't solve it. She tries to help him by prescribing Descartes's cogito ergo sum without much success for the simple reason that one should kept the two worlds- the world of matter and the world of spirit separate.Bhaskar frankly remarks:

"LeelaSabnis was a muddled creature. As muddled as me. Muddled by her ancestry, by marriage, by divorce, by too many books. When she made love yes-when she made love, the confusion momentarily lifted. But immediately after, as she stood smoking looking down at me... The confusion descended in one roaring storm"

Anuradha was an illegitimate child born of an insane mother. Her mother earned her livelihood by singing for strangers. She was taken away by one of her lovers who killed her with a broken whiskey bottle. Anuradha whose name was Meera then, was brought up by one of her aunts who gave her education. She was molested as a child and underwent many sufferings. She became a film star and was seduced by several producers. She left the profession with the help of Aftab .Now she had been living with him without any formal marriage. As she says:"You can't marry everyone you love. So why marry anyone at all?"

Som is amazed to learn that she wanted to be nobody's wife. When he asked her if she would like to be married to someone, she says;"I can imagine I am married to Aftab. I can imagine I am married to you.

My mother used to imagine she was married to Krishna.”

Anuradha inherits from her mother a belief in faith, Som, son of a scientist is a rationalist and a believer in intelligence and expediency. Though lowly born and scarcely educated, Anuradha has wisdom higher than Som's. In her way she is fond of Som .He expresses his love for Anuradha on many occasions: “I lived on the nourishment of the shades thrown by her naked body under the chromatic shower.” But she has her own loyalty. Som wants to win her heart and not merely possess her body. At the height of their love affair, the mysterious Anuradha disappears. She embodies the concept of sacrifice. Explaining this, ArunJoshi says: “Anuradha's role 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 something .So she is to be taken away from him.”

Anuradha, who knew him so well, explained the reasons of his unhappiness and dissatisfaction. “You don't know what you want,” says she. “You don't know what is wrong and you don't know what you want.”LeelaSabnis thinks that his troubles originate from his habit of ‘always playing game with the world.’ She tells him bluntly: “You are lonely on the one hand. On the other, you have built a shell around yourself. You are bored, bored stiff in your little shell. That is the long and the short of it.”

A number of women characters in ‘The Last Labyrinth’ serve to highlight SomBhaskar’s impatience by their ostensible serenity. Geeta is one of them. But LeelaSabnis, the Michigan - trained psychologist is different. She is a typical product of Bombay. She analyses too much; she analyses like other people breathe. She “knew a lot even if she had experienced less and suffered even less.” But then as Bhaskar himself admits, she was “a muddled creature. As muddled as me.”Bhaskar then needs faith, needs certitude and needs reassurance and he tries to find these in the world of Anuradha.

### **Conclusion**

Both the worlds- the Western world of science and rationalism and the Indian world of faith and transcendentalism are tangibly carved out by a juxtaposition of symbols .Each character is a living being in his or her context and yet each is a symbol. Bhaskar's mother, his wife and Gargi form a series,a facet of reality and a mode of endurance and faith. Anuradha is a symbol of the indefinable, the elusive, and the life - spirit in women and also of the spirit of sacrifice which is the highest gift of Indian world of faith .The Western world is spelt out by LeelaSabnis, the Indian spiritual world of Faith by Anuradha and Gargi. . Thus Arun Joshi, in almost all his novels, has make an effort to present women characters with firm belief in human values. The women characters are the main source of motivation to the protagonists and help them to follow the right path. Also the contrast between the virtuous life and sinful life make the difference more strikingly. The women characters play an important role in ArunJoshi’s novels. Thus to conclude he has explored the Indian values in *The Last Labyrinth* through women characters. The post-colonial youths believe in materialistic approach and the re-discovery of spiritual faith is the only solution to it. Arun Joshi through this novel suggests that Westernization can never give satisfaction of life as traditional values lie deep in the sub-conscious mind and again and again reverberate to the conscious mind.

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