

The Lanes and Laybrinths of Arun Joshi's Aesthetic Sense

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Abstract:

Indian fiction humanises the setting in which the story's action takes place. These towns and cities are attributed with adjectives and are beautified by the usage of vivid descriptions of the art and culture. This art and the culture also act as a catalyst for overall character development for the protagonists. India has always been equated with art and culture. That is the reason why we became a colony of the Britishers, to now it is also the reason for tourism to grow as it is growing today. Indians too do not fail to flaunt the culture in the products that are produced from it, whether it's the dance, music, theatics and related art forms or literature. Everything from the mythologies like Ramayana and Mahabharata to the modern novels has vivid descriptions of the art, architecture and of course the culture as well (Gupta, 2023). All of this makes the literature coming from the country a poignant part of the study of aesthetics. This also helps distinguish the Indian idea of aestheticism from that studied in the West. Arun Joshi's novel The Last Labyrinth is an intricate exploration of the human psyche, existential dilemmas, and the relentless search for meaning in a world dominated by materialism. At the core of the novel lies a profound engagement with Indian aesthetics, which serves as a guiding framework for understanding the protagonist Som Bhaskar's spiritual and emotional journey. Indian aesthetics, rooted in ancient philosophical and literary traditions, provides a rich lens to analyse the novel's treatment of themes such as desire, suffering, transcendence, and the search for unity with the infinite. Som Bhaskar is a deeply complex character whose existential dilemmas and spiritual struggles reflect the tensions between material desires, existential angst, and the search for transcendence. His character embodies many themes central to Indian philosophy and aesthetics, such as the conflict between maya (illusion) and moksha (liberation), the inner struggle to find meaning, and the quest for unity with the infinite. This

paper explores Joshi's art of visualisation and sense of aesthetics, while highlighting the interplay between materialism and spirituality. And also tries to discuss how the settings of the novels contribute to the build-up of the story and act as secondary characters.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, The Last Labyrinth, Materialism, Existentialism, Indian aesthetics, Philosophy, Spirituality.

Arun Joshi is a post-modern Indian writer who has written works like The Foreigner, The Last Labyrinth, Strange Case of Billy Biswas and others. The writer is under the deep influence of theories like existentialism and therefore narrates the Indian version of the theories. However, a closer look at his work gives out an essential sense of aesthetics as well. The paper explores his novel The Last Labyrinth to understand the aesthetic aspect of Arun Joshi. Arun Joshi's The Last Laybrinth (1981) is a story of a businessman, Som Bhashar, living in Mumbai with his wife and two daughters. He is a materialistic man, has a house of his own, a flourished business and is always keen to grow; however, the growth he wants is all in terms of wealth, even if it comes at the stake of his well-being, and is far from the ideas of spirituality. He is an insomniac and has a ringing call in his head which goes like "the strumming of great chords way up in the sky, beating the old tattoo: I want, I want"(Joshi, 1981). This brings him to Banaras with a business deal in his mind to take over shares of Aftab's company, and from there on, he takes a journey to connect to religion and culture:

"The issue {shares of Aftab's company} had been there, alive all the time, at the back of my mind. But it had been swamped out by Lal Haveli, its sounds and colours, the maze of the city as I had seen it from the terrace by the unexpected stirring in me of some long dormant essence of a different kind" (Joshi, 1981).

However, regardless of how different the settings of the two places unfold, the thing that is common in both is their role, which helps Som transcend into a different kind of person from the modern life of Mumbai to the ancient city of Banaras. If given a closer look at it, Som's development also happens parallel to the kind of aesthetics he is surrounded by. Som, who once was restless, was taken around Benaras by Anuradha and a spiritual guide, Gargi, which led to a spiritual awakening in Som. The tranquillity of the river water and the essence of spirituality

in the city of Benaras influence Som's journey and turn it into one that moves towards faith and belief.

Som Bhasker is reminded of his father's death at the Ghats of Ganga, and the incident here is narrated by Joshi as a way to convey how death is also a major part of life and to give an insight into our protagonist's spiritual journey (The Ashvmegh Team, 2015). But, on a close read, it does give the reader a sense of aesthetics in it. Arun Joshi, while talking about the cultural aspect of Ganga and the ghat, has also made sure to describe the scene vividly for his readers. So, we not only experience an initiation of spirituality inside Som Bhaskar but also the beauty of the ghats. We do read about the holiness of the river Ganga, but alongside it, we also get to consider the aestheticism of the river. Arun Joshi has also mentioned the mosque visible from Aftab's Haveli, another aspect of religion and culture, but while the cultural idea is prominent, he also poses it as a visual imagery for the readers.

Along with fulfilling the visual appeal for the reader, the ghats, rivers, the mosque and the Lal Haveli of Aftab in particular also become an integral part of Som Bhasker's journey. Besides Som also has a lot of people around him who have firm belief in a stronger power: like Geeta; his wife, Gargi; the spiritual guide, Aaftab: a foil to Som, his (Som's) mother as well while she was alive and above all of them Anuradha; "a mystery whose gaze has been forged for carrying out transactions of soul" (Prasad), the most mysterious inhabitant of the entire labyrinth, "a labyrinthine woman, at once young and old, ancient and modern, demoniac in her lust and divine in her love. She is every man's woman and no man's wife." (Rao, 1989) Talking of him, Som feels:

"Her was a city without a name, a city in an oasis, plundered a thousand times and waiting to be plundered again by men like Aftab and me, who forever lurked in its desert purlieus... 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 1981 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" (Joshi, 1981)

In Indian philosophy, suffering (*duhkha*) is seen as an inevitable aspect of human existence and a catalyst for self-realisation. Anuradha's life is marked by profound suffering. Her pain enables

her to confront the limitations of Som's materialistic pursuits and show him a deeper understanding of himself and the world. Anuradha's suffering can be understood through the lens of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which teaches that pain and discontent arise from attachment and ignorance. The novel portrays suffering as a necessary step in the journey towards self-awareness and spiritual growth. Talking about the power of suffering, Gargi tells Som that "someone who has known suffering" (Joshi, 1981) will come to help him grapple with his inner conflicts and the illusions of the external world. Som, thus, embarks on a path of self-discovery that echoes the transformative power of suffering in Indian aesthetics.

In one of his poems, Shelley refers to the city of Venice as "a perplexed labyrinth of walls," as it has about 120 islands full of narrow, paved streets and lanes. Benaras too has the tortuous labyrinth of narrow lanes for Som, in which is situated the Lal Haveli. Bhaskar explains his perception of it as:

"A desolate garden; a brooding windowless facade, white-walled walls smudged with the hands of rickshaw pullers; a broken fountain, a ceiling full of unlit chandeliers; ventilators of stained glass. Where else could I have seen the sarcophagus of green marble that, even in my dreams, possesses the power to chill me? How else the idea of a labyrinth within the labyrinth of lanes that stretch westwards from the ghats of Benaras" (Joshi, 1981).

Both the Lal Haveli and its possessor, Aftab Rai, remind one of *Wuthering Heights*, which resists foreigners. One cannot probe much about the antecedents of Aftab Rai, of the intricacies of the haveli. As representatives of antiquity, they remain a mystery. (Bhatnagar,). It "is the darkness of the labyrinth: darkness of death, darkness of madness, darkness of void." (Mohan)

One of the central symbols in the novel is the labyrinth, which serves as a metaphor for *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth described in Indian philosophy. The labyrinth represents the confusion, entanglements, and suffering inherent in worldly existence. Som Bhaskar's obsession with the labyrinth reflects his existential crisis and his quest to find meaning in a world that appears chaotic and fragmented. Aftab, an otherwise mysterious and silent inhabitant of this labyrinth, once opens up to Som:

“You don’t understand us. You work by logic. By your brain. You are proud of your education or what you consider education. There is an understanding that only suffering and humiliation bring. Anuradha has that. Even I have a bit of it. You are empty of that understanding.” (Joshi, 1981)

Bhaskar’s repeated attempts to understand and conquer the labyrinth symbolise the human desire to break free from *samsara* and achieve liberation (*moksha*). He asks Gargi:

“Why should there be this turn to evolution? Why should man be equipped, burdened, with this strange sensibility of urge or drive? Is it by chance? Or, is there a meaning in it?” He further conveys his dilemma as: “The point is this spirit is there. And if it is there, if man has inherited it, then what is he to do with it? In other words, what precisely is expected of him, of you and me, of Anuradha, of everyone else? Darwin did not say how we are supposed to evolve further”. (Joshi, 1981), And his inability to comprehend the labyrinth fully parallels the human struggle to understand the mysteries of existence, a central concern in Indian philosophy. He moves towards spirituality only once he experiences peace while being a part of the cultural practices. And this happens because of the religio-cultural entities that surround him in the city, which is indeed known for its spirituality. And with all of this in consideration, it could therefore be said that the river ghats and the mosque pose as secondary characters in this Arun Joshi’s novel. Just like how the secondary characters impact the journey of the protagonist, here the religious symbols play that part for Bhaskar.

Arun Joshi’s novel, which has gained a fair share of popularity under the Indian absurdist and existentialist studies, can also be read under the framework of Indian Aesthetics. It can also be considered a novel, where the settings are not mere places but, in fact, are brought to life by the author to help the protagonist realise his potential and go deeper into the realms of discovering his psyche. A broader reading and understanding of his novels, especially the one mentioned here and locating it under the lens of Indian aesthetics, can help build a different understanding of the text altogether.

Indian Aesthetics also goes back to the medieval periods of Indian cultures in the writings of philosophers such as Bharat Muni, who gave the Natyashastra and explained the Navarasa in

it. It is, however, also a relevant aspect of modern Indian works, one such example is the novel of Arun Joshi, which is under consideration. *The Last Labyrinth* evokes a range of *rasas*, particularly *shringara* (romantic and erotic love), *karuna* (compassion and pathos), and *shanta* (tranquillity). These *rasas* are intricately woven into the narrative, shaping the reader's engagement with Som's journey.

The *shringara rasa* is evident in Som's intense and passionate relationship with Anuradha. His love for her transcends physical attraction and becomes a symbol of his yearning for the infinite. However, this love is tinged with *karuna rasa*, as it is marked by suffering, unfulfilled desire, and a sense of loss. Anuradha's elusiveness and Som's inability to fully understand/possess her evoke a deep sense of pathos, compelling the reader to empathise with his inner turmoil. Som confesses:

There was a mystery about Anuradha that I had yet to crack. She should have been no more to me than a woman trying to save her lover's (husband's) property. She should have been transparent. Why should she appear mysterious unless possibly there was a mystery within me that, in her proximity, got somehow stirred as one turning fork might stir another." (Joshi, 1981). Ultimately, the novel gestures toward *shanta rasa*, the aesthetic emotion of peace and tranquillity associated with spiritual realisation. While Som struggles to find inner peace throughout the narrative, his journey suggests the possibility of achieving *shanta rasa* through self-awareness and the transcendence of worldly attachments. Anuradha asserts that Darwin is not the last truth, "Maybe, Krishna begins where Darwin left off". (Joshi, 1981) This progression from *shringara* and *karuna* to *shanta* reflects the Indian aesthetic ideal of moving from emotional engagement to spiritual equanimity.

The story of Gautam Buddha, which is an example of one such piece of literature and philosophy that discusses aesthetics, can be put parallel to the story of Som Bhasker. Just like Siddharta, who was a king and lived a well-settled life, but never felt at ease, the protagonists here also never felt a sense of settlement in their modernised life. However, just like Siddharta, he too attains a sense of belongingness once he shifts his settings from something which is considered 'civilised' to one that is more about culture and spirituality. The only difference, though, is that Siddhartha achieved salvation and became Buddha, but Som doesn't go through

such a transformation. However, this shift in the landscape does change him mentally, and he does get detached from the material world.

If we go further into the core of Indian Aesthetics, we could also relate it to the Bhav Theory that was laid by Bharat Muni in his theoretical work, Natyashastra. The Bhav theory was initially developed for its use in Indian performing arts. It suggests that a character has three kinds of bhav, which include Sthayi Bhav or the permanent mood, vibhachari/ sanchari bhav or transitory state of mind and satvik bhav or temperamental states. It also suggests that experience of different kinds of environments, whether it's in the form of people around or the settings near the character, due to which they see a change in their emotions. This is called Anubhav (Vishwaguru India). In the case of Som also a similar phenomenon is taking place. And that is what connects the Bhav theory to modern texts as well and to the novel that is under consideration here.

Here Som's sthayi bhav is the constant voice in the head, which keeps telling him to want more and more, along with his materialistic outlook of the world. His experience that he has on the ghats of Banaras changes his mental temperament, hence acting as an anubhav for him. Anuradha, Gargi, and Aaftab in the Last Laybrinth also make for the anubhav as they are the people surrounding the protagonist in the novel being discussed. Hence, becoming a part of aesthetics and contributing to its development.

A lot of Hinduism and Buddhist philosophy of life and spirituality delves into the idea of how just a shift of place, a difference in the surroundings or the environment, changes the person completely and makes him/her want to attain the peace of mind. The journey, however troublesome, does change the person for good and makes them/distant from materialism. Som faces his own hindrances where his materialistic life clashes with his desire for peace; however, he achieves a salvation of his own kind by the end.

Along with this, Som's journey can be seen as a struggle with the idea of detachment (*vairagya*). Indian aesthetics emphasises that liberation can only be achieved by renouncing attachment to worldly possessions, desires, and ego. Where Som Bhasker's mental journey towards spirituality is paralleled by the spiritual surroundings he is transported to. It's also interesting to note that his restlessness is also only evident in a setting where the culture of

hustle persists; the protagonist was made to feel detached from the so-called ‘civilised’ society. While Som is aware of his inner emptiness, he remains unable to let go of his obsessions, illustrating the difficulty of achieving detachment in a world of temptations and illusions.

Conclusion:

We may sum up that Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth* is a profound exploration of the human condition, steeped in the principles of Indian aesthetics and philosophy. Through the character of Som Bhaskar and his existential journey, the novel delves into themes of *maya*, *kama*, *samsara*, and *moksha*, offering a rich tapestry of emotional and spiritual experiences. Som Bhaskar represents a deeply flawed, yet profoundly human, individual caught between the illusions of the material world and the yearning for spiritual transcendence. His journey is a modern reflection of the timeless questions central to Indian philosophy: What is the purpose of life? How does one escape the cycle of suffering? And how can one find unity with the infinite? Through Som’s struggles, Arun Joshi presents a nuanced exploration of Indian aesthetics and the human condition, emphasising the need to transcend worldly desires and find meaning in the larger, spiritual context of existence.

Ultimately, the novel underscores the importance of transcending worldly attachments and desires to achieve spiritual liberation. By engaging with these timeless elements of Indian aesthetics, The Labyrinth, as a central metaphor, encapsulates the complexities of life and the search for meaning, while the interplay of *rasa* evokes a range of aesthetic and emotional responses. *The Last Labyrinth* not only reflects the universal struggles of human existence but also affirms the enduring relevance of Indian philosophical traditions in understanding and navigating the labyrinth of life.

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