



TRANSITION OF ARUN JOSHI'S PROTAGONIST FROM FANTASY To REALITY IN *THE LAST LABYRINTH*

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi is one of the prolific Indian writers to discuss dilemma and rootlessness of his heroes in the conflicting socio-cultural environment of their societies. The novel, The Last Labyrinth, due to its execution of fantasy of sensual and spiritual, gives the readers a fantastic experience of reality. The image of labyrinth is both ancient and modern concept which literally means the intricate and convoluted paths that usually make the intruder confused and bewildered. In Joshi's sense, it is a sense of loneliness, confusion and a feeling of being trapped. The protagonist, Som Bhaskar, who is lonely, estranged and isolated is obsessed with various forms of labyrinth. Strangely, he suffers from disappointment, an ambiguous frustration, inadequacies and emptiness which he call 'voids'. In fact, the image of a labyrinth in the novel is closely associated with Som Bhasker, his world and his unsuccessful attempts to disentangle the secrets of life, love, death and divinity. The novel assumes more a fantastic dimension in Som Bhasker's communication with an antique woman, Anuradha at Lal Haveli, a feudal like mansion in Benaras. But his fantasy for Anuradha becomes a reality with her disappearance leaving him engrossing on the futility of human situation.

INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi is one of the prolific Indian novelists who gave a new dimension to the Indian English fiction . In his novels, Joshi had discussed the dilemma and rootlessness of his protagonists which arise out of the conflicting socio-cultural environment of their societies . In fact, Joshi novels are designed with the features and themes like alienation, cultural conflict, dilemma in the East-West encounter and existential materialism. Joshi's talent is demonstrated in the exploration of spiritual and moral crisis of modern man and his constant effort to arrive at a firm affirmation. This affirmation and realization lead Joshi's men towards a fruitful conception of life's vision. Hence, Joshi's fictional world is can be observed as a revelation of society where man is unavoidably confronted by his self and his existential



questions. This tendency of Joshi's thematic concerns shows the existential influence of Camus and Keirkegaard on the author's imagination. As a whole, Joshi's novels are classified as the doctrines of man's attempts towards a better understanding of himself and the world.

“Fantasy is a fiction usually set in an imaginary locale often but not always without locations, events or people from the real world. Most fantasy uses magic or other supernatural elements as a main plot element, theme or setting”.¹ As a common rule, it is distinguished from the genres of science, fiction and horror. The genre of fantasy is studied in a number of disciplines including English and other language studies, cultural and medieval studies and history. The traits of fantasy can be identified through the fantastic elements where inspiration from mythology and folklore remains a constant theme. These fantastic elements may be located in a hidden or apparently real world setting where such elements are part of the world.

However, when it comes to reality, it means that someone are something which is real are actually exists is called reality. The Oxford English Dictionary defines reality as " the state of things as they actually exists rather than as they may appear or might be imagined. Reality includes everything that is and has been, whether or not, it is observable or comprehensible."

² Human beings experience through five sensory organs. Hence the idea of the external world is developed from the information collected through sensory organs and also through facts and theories of the world. Due to this, a person's ability of vision is subject to change with the introduction of new facts and theories about the reality of things. Fantasy, however, is not restricted by facts and theories about the way things work but rather by the imagination of an individual.

Among the modern Indian English novelists, Arun Joshi is the youngest who presented his fiction around motivating actions of the psychological imbalances of his protagonists. Significantly, Joshi's protagonists are portrayed with the individual traits finding difficulty in their social environment. These heroes are highly educated but pathetically fail to adapt themselves with everyday realities and with their instinctive character which is often irrational and indifferent. These pitfalls turn them alienated from their society which they consider ominous and materialistic. Even though they occasionally emerge successful in their odds by liberating themselves from the association and their external environment, they still remain driven by the urges of their subconscious selves until they attained affirmation.

Joshi's work, *The Last Labyrinth* is written from the protagonist narrator's point of view. The narrative goes on with in the flashback method with the events in the life of Som Bhaskar, the protagonist who has developed a lustful infatuation for another's wife, Anuradha. In his futile pursuit of this mysterious woman, Som's life takes a quest dimension in the most puzzling mysteries of death, a last labyrinth.



The novel, *'The Last Labyrinth'* gives the readers a fantastic experience because of its replicating execution of fantasy of the sensual and spiritual locale, the feudal looking haveli which is the 'sepulchral, sensual den of Aftab'. The image of labyrinth is both an ancient and modern concept which can be referred literally to the intricate and convoluted paths that make the one confused and bewildered finding difficulty to way out. Joshi uses the word labyrinth making it echoing in the nuances of loneliness, isolation, thought of confusion and a sense of being trapped. Som Bhaskar, who is lonely, isolated and estranged is obsessed with various forms of a labyrinth. To say more aptly, the image of labyrinth is closely associated with him, his world and his unsuccessful attempts to disentangle the secret threads of life, love, death and divinity. Lal Haveli, Aftab Roy's feudal like discreet mansion which is located in a blind valley and built with mazes and with 'either with no plan or with a most meticulous plan', reflects the labyrinthine narrow lanes of Benaras, a spiritual city. So, "the idea of labyrinth within the Labyrinth of lanes that stretch westwards from the ghats of Benaras"³ appear to Som Bhaskar a fantastic labyrinth of life.

From the very opening lines of the novel Som Bhaskar strikes us a different kind of person, a delineated and disgruntled character: "Above all, I have a score to settle. I forget nothing, forgive no one" (P.7) These words from his diary suggest his disappointment and ambiguous frustration. Som Bhaskar acquires the stature of a billionaire industrialist at the age of twelve. Educated in the world's finest universities he becomes a successful businessman in Bombay. Despite having married to an 'extraordinary woman', Geeta, and a father of two children, he suffers from an unknown discontentment of life. All these details are revealed to the readers through his diary and "the way he zigzags into his memory resembles a maze and is a reflection of his inner turbulence and restlessness".⁴

When the narrative takes momentum, it is revealed that Som Bhaskar has been suffering from a kind of inadequacies, an emptiness, a vacuum within as well as without, which he calls 'voids'. He further says: "It is the voids of the world, more than its objects, that bother me. The voids and empty spaces, with in and without. First, it was only the voids without ...voids of caves and voids of the sky; the terrible vacancies of *Lokalok*". (P.42) This description of ambiguity is the suggestive of his possession of an ungratified hunger: "hunger of the body, Hunger of the spirit". (P.9) Due to this reason, Som Bhaskar, like Billy Biswas of *'The Strange Case...'* becomes obsessed with strange hallucinations of the mysterious and unidentified voices, 'mostly of the dead'. These unclear and ambiguous voices make him spend many sleepless nights and gets disturbed by the 'Continuous song' in voids all the time "beating the old tattoo; I want. I want. I want". (P.74) Yet another hint of his undefined hunger and discontent comes from him: "what I needed, perhaps, was some thing, somebody, some where in which the two worlds combined". (P.74) It is certainly the fantastic world of Anuradha and her antique looking body. This unsuccessful psychological conflict of Som Bhaskar to understand and gratify his hungers provide a fantastic texture to the novel.



Som consults many doctors and friends for his problems, but in vain. The 'voices' continue to hang on Som as he still hears the music 'threshed way up in the sky'. Som's scholar friend, Leela Sabnis considers these voices to be some misleading illusions that cause Som suffer from the ambiguous hallucinations: "you are much too high strung. Without a reason. You are a neurotic. A compulsive fornicator". (P.72) She further attributes him with the problem of identity and says: "may be what you want is a mystical identification, identification with a godhead, as most Hindus want, sooner or later". (P.103) But the senior doctor whom Som met provides a different dimension for his fantasy of his problems: "A soul might also 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". (P.67)

The novel, however, assumes a more fantastic dimension when Som Bhaskar, at the age of thirty five, meets Anuradha at New Delhi. Anuradha, who lives with Aftab Roy appears to Som an absolute woman: 'a monument: tall, handsome, ruined'. Som is frantically drawn towards Anuradha by " the unquenched fires that constantly burnt in her (those) haunted eyes". (P.11) Later Som meets the couple in Benaras at their feudal like mansion, Lal Haveli which was built like a labyrinth. Though he visits Benaras to deal with Aftab Roy's shares, his disguised intention is to meet his dream woman, Anuradha. Som gets very much entranced by her dark sexy eyes who is "not self-conscious about her body of whose grace and sensuousness she seemed unaware". (P.36) But Som's fantasy for Anuradha is brought to surface when he knows that she is not married to Aftab Roy. He pities her for being 'nobody's wife'. When Som probed her for the reasons for not getting married, she further makes his illusions more complex: "I have never been married ... It is better not to be anybody's wife ... you can't marry everyone you love. So, why marry any one at all?" (P.39) This hard reality doesn't deter Som to give up his infatuation for her as his blind attraction reaches lustful proportions to possess her completely.

Som's experiences of fantasy are often turn in to a reality of life experience by the timely intervention of Anuradha and Aftab. In his stay at the haveli, he is entertained by Azizun's (Aftab's niece) song which reminded him of the 'core of loneliness' traveling by the 'benighted underside of the world'. Here Aftab remarks that for him Anuradha is his 'brains' and Azizun, the 'song'. After this Anuradha tells him about Gargi the deaf mute woman and her Sufi pir turned father's supernatural powers. When Som mocks at the authenticity of these powers, Anuradha retorts at him: "You are wrong about many things. You or wrong even about yourself. You think you know a lot, when, in fact, you don't". (P.55) These words are the scathing attack on his prided fantasy of intellectual individuality and his lack of divinity. During his stay in the haveli, when he comes closer to Anuradha to possess her physically, she could understand his mystical desires: "I know. You want something. You badly want something. I could see that the first time we met. But it is not me. That, too, I can



see". (P.53) This sort of remarks make Som difficult to understand Anuradha and her inner recesses of mind. At this Juncture, Anuradha's rejection makes Aftab's haveli appear to Som 'like wilderness that surrounds abandoned tombs'. Som realizes that he is not intellectually smart enough to understand and deal with the labyrinthine mind of Anuradha.

Som's obsession for Anuradha, however, receives a severe blow with her appeal to him to leave the haveli forever. His restlessness doesn't find any respite from his tour of Europe and America. At this moment "he is beset by doubts and uncertainties about the reality of the haveli that always tantalizes him with its incomprehensible and alluring mystery".⁵ At last he meets Gargi and presents his problems. She discloses: "God will send some one to you....Some one who has known suffering" (P.107), clearly pointing at Anuradha. His unending passion for Anuradha makes him unconsciously lead to the haveli again and again. During his visits to the haveli the pathetic side of Anuradha's life make him love her more. While sleeping in the haveli, Som is once again haunted by the undefined voices: 'I want. I want. I want'. Actually it is Anuradha and her mind he really wants. So, With this fantastic sympathetic maneuver Som tries to probe the psychic realms of Anuradha to reach her physically and psychologically.

Later the reality of events take unexpected twist in Som's life. After his return to Bombay he suffers a massive stroke. When he tries to contact Anuradha, her reluctance to talk to him makes him furious. Later he comes to know the shocking reality from his wife Gita who received a letter from Anuradha in which she expressed her regret for intruding in Gita's life. Though Anuradha intends to save Som and his family from ruin but it is taken as her indifference towards him. So he decides to 'settle the scores' with Anuradha and Aftab roy and orders his manager Mr.K. to buy the shares who later found them on the name of Anuradha and are kept with the custody of the priest of the Krishna temple on the Hills.

Despite his poor health, Som takes up the arduous journey to the Hills to possess the shares. In the journey, from Mr.K. Som knows more the misery and suffering of Anuradha. Mr.K. reveals: "Illegitimate child, insane mother, no home. Molested as a child. Witness to murders, suicides, every conceivable evil of the world". (P.175) When Som meets Gargi on the Hills, she discloses a puzzling revelation of Anuradha who had left Som only to save him from death. But this truth and reality doesn't prevent Som from his determination of possessing Anuradha's shares and again meets Gargi: "I can't give up Anuradha... I want to take not only these shares but also Anuradha". (P.197) For this stupidity, Gargi only replies: "God does not work in this simple manner, God does not seek revenge. Man's vanity (*ahankar*) brings him revenge enough". (P.197)

At this juncture, in his fantasy of wild infatuation and blind conviction, Som goes to the haveli and compels Anuradha to come along with him to Bombay. Here Som pathetically ignores Aftab's emotional association with Anuradha. Though Aftab gets infuriated at Som's



betrayal, he complacently tells him: "I wish you had left us alone. Anuradha and I need each other...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...you are empty of that understanding". (P.200)

When Som adamantly insists to stay at the haveli on that night, it is Anuradha who revealed the reality of the imminent threat to his life: "you don't understand. You don't know these people. Things could happen to you in this haveli and no one would ever know". (P.202.) Som comes to the haveli next morning only to get shocked to see Anuradha's disappearance. Later the bewildered Som receives a letter from Aftab in which he described him a snake: "I had liked you...I had let a snake enter my home...never put your treacherous foot in Lal haveli...if you ever returned...you would pay heavily". (P.205). As Som suspects the possible danger from Aftab's driver, Tarakki, the reality of the situation makes him carry his gun.

Thus Arun Joshi's novels demonstrate the realities of life with an exaggeration into the realms of fantasy. It seems that the author had worked on the temerarious and irrational association of ideas and imagination to transform into a capturing fantasy. Due to this fusion of fantasy and reality his novels provide the readers a gripping enigma of reading experience.

WORKS AND REFERENCES

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