

Symbolism in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

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Abstract

All the writers of creative imagination while dealing with various aspects of a novel the major problem faces is how to say and what to say whether to employ various techniques to put their message across or simply to weave a story. Imagery and symbolism facilitates this and enables a writer to express his/ her vision with clarity and permits the reader to visualize what the writer describes revealing the submerged truth which cannot be expressed otherwise. They enhance the quality of a literary work and are the soul of any literature. Arun Joshi, a novelist of psychological insights and inner concerns seeks to convey the truth hidden in the subconscious of his protagonists by employing the technique of symbolic imagery. He is the one among many writers on Indian literary canvas who uses images and symbols as two narrative wheels to run the story. This paper tries to shed light on both these aspects in his novel *The Last Labyrinth*.

Key Words: Symbolism, Imagery, Psychology, Narrative, Sign, Dreams, description, Labyrinth

Symbolism - Its Origin and Scope

Symbolism is an integral part of human expression more so the literary expression. From times immemorial humans have been communicating among themselves through different symbols comprehended and understood by the members within the community. As Arthur Symons asserts:

Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them in Heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what symbolism in literature really is, a form of expression at the best but approximately, essentially, but arbitrary, until it has obtained a force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed not even language. What are the words themselves nothing but symbols almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters? (Symons, Arthur. 1952: 6).

The word symbol is based on the Greek verb 'symballein' and its noun 'symbolon' which means 'to toss together' or 'to join together' or 'sign' suggestive of the idea of analogy between sign and the signified. A symbol or a sign is an object which represents or stands for something else, that is the signified. This word symbolon was first used by the Egyptians as a sort of identification stamp made of various materials known as 'tessera' in Latin. The 'tessera' was originally regarded as a 'symbolon'; it is only later that the concept is applied to the sign and to the pictorial reference to the tessera'. At the same time, however the verb symballein is used in manner of speech that suggests gathering or hiding or veiling (Oxford Dictionary, 1971: 737). 'Symbolon' is also referred to in different contexts and for different purposes - as a term in logic, in mathematics, in semantics, and semiotics and epistemology. It has long history in the world of liturgy, of fine arts and of theology, synonym for creed suggesting to those articles of faith of a religious community. Algebraic and logical symbols are conventional, agreed upon as signs, whereas religious symbols are based on some intrinsic relation between the sign and the thing signified like the cross which is symbol of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christ's crucifixion on the Cross became a symbol of Christianity.

Imagery - Its Origin and Scope

It was Yeats, who said that "wisdom speaks first in images" (Yeats, W.B. 1903: 196)

The word image is derived from the Latin word 'Imitari,' the English equivalent of which is to imitate which involves imitation or reproduction of the form of the person or thing. The principal meaning in dictionaries is the optical counter part of an object produced by lens, mirror or other optical system or likeness of an object produced on a photographic material (Webster, 1934: 1233). Image is further explained as an impression, a mental picture of remembered experience. The concept of imagery derived from the psychological term image has been widely used in literary criticism. The word originally stood for visual pictures but with the passage of time its usage shifted to language and literature. In its literal sense, an image is a concrete object identifiable in the physical world, which when imitated and reproduced or represented, performs definite functions in a literary text. According to New International Dictionary of English Language,

An image is a mental representation of something not actually present to the senses, a revival or imitation or sensible experience together with accompanying feelings the reproduction in memory or imagination of sensations of sight, touch, hearing etc as visual, tactile, auditory images (Webster, 1934: 1234).

Arun Joshi and his novels

Arun Joshi, son of a botanist and eminent educationists, was born in Varanasi and educated in India and the U.S. He got an engineering degree from the university of Kanas, further he had a degree in industrial

management from M.I.T. For a short period he had an assignment in mental hospital in the United States where his uncle was a psychiatrist. He came back to India to pursue a career in the corporate world. Before his death he was working as an executive director at the Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources. All these events- his parentage, his academic experiences in India and America, his working in mental hospital and his joining the industrial field paved the way for future novelist. He has written five novels. *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange case of Billi Biswas*(1971), *The Apprentice*(1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River*(1990).

The world of Arun Joshi's novels is replete of the highly alienated characters. He is passionately concerned with the dilemma of human loneliness. His writings are mainly addressed to the isolation of man in an alien world and the estrangement of the individual from himself, the society and culture. He finds that self alienation can affect an individual worse than social alienation and this is a great obstacle in the path of an individual's mental and psychic development. The questions of the self and its existence are the points to be probed in his fictional world. As R. K. Dhavan writes:

Joshi delves into the inner recesses of human psyche where he finds instincts and impulses at work; he seeks a process of the apprehension of reality which may lead him to the world of the core of the truth of man's life. He realizes man's uniqueness and loneliness in an indifferent and inscrutable universe. (1992:8)

Symbolism in *The Last Labyrinth*

The Last Labyrinth (1981) Arun Joshi's magnum opus won Sahitya Academy Award, India's highest literary honor, for the novelist. Khushwant Singh reviews the novel as —splendid, serious, disturbing, lyrical and irresistibly readable- a fascinating exploration into the turbulent inner world of a successful urban India (Online). The title of the novel *The Last Labyrinth* is highly significant. It stands for the great mystery that hangs about the books deep structure, is itself a matter of great inquiry. Labyrinth has been defined as:

The complex prison built by Daedalus for king Mines of Create to contain the Minotaur. The name probably is derived from labrys, the sacred double axe of the Cretans, and there was the temple of bull cult in Crete. So complicated was the labyrinth that none could escape once it was entered.... The name was applied not only to buildings... but to all kinds of mazes. (1985:22)

Writing about the title and the novel Shankar Kumar states: “His novel takes us to the heart of darkness- one of his most favorite metaphors is the Labyrinth -but he is not a prophet of despair. All his novels hold out promise of regeneration and redemption.”(2003:82) This novel is yet another attempt of Joshi to delve deep into the heart of the individual who searches for the thing he does not know- solace and/or redemption. The novel turns into a spiritual autobiography of a soul lost into the labyrinth of the world seeking the way to exit. It is a psychological insight into the human soul, into its urges and aspirations. In This novel the novelist probes the

Labyrinths of the soul which have become metaphors of Life and Death. He delves deep into the human psyche and narrates the tension resulting from clashes of the inner self. After winning the Sahitya Academy Award, Arun Joshi admitted in an interview that for him, the meaning of life “lies in the dark hopeless mazes where you may get irretrievably lost or discover the shining secret at the core of life.”(1997:89)

This novel too resembles his earlier novels but differs at philosophical standpoint. Like Joshi's other works it deals with the turbulent inner world of Som Bhaskar, the narrator-protagonist who is also a millionaire and foreign educated Indian like Sindi Oberai and Billy Biswas of *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* respectively. But the sharp contradiction from philosophical perspective is that the novelist has reflected the predicament of those unbelievers who do not find any metaphysical control beyond this material world. Arun Joshi again takes India and especially the Hindu view of life an option to provide solution and affirmation to his protagonist who thinks that merely to know and to possess can help to solve the mystery of human existence but finally conflicts that the real joy of life can be found in money and mistress? The conflict present in the mind of Som is a reflection of conflict between two cultures which he has inherited from his parents. Born of a religious mother and scientist father, Som grows into a confused person. He does not actually know what he wants –

If only one knew what one wanted. Or, maybe, to know was what I wanted. To know. Just that. No more. No less. This, then, was a labyrinth, too, this going forward and backward and sideways of the mind” (*Last Labyrinth*- 53).

Critics are of the opinion that indecisive nature is inherent in human beings. S. Radhakrishnan says “in human nature itself there is a polarity, there is a dichotomy” (*Towards a New World* 141). Som is in search of the realities and mysteries of love, life and death. His doubts and dilemmas remain unsolved. He is unable to find his way out of the complicated labyrinths of life and the mystery of death. There is this vast cosmos the puzzles of which he cannot solve by himself. He talks about his problem to his friend and physician,

“... for many years now, I have had this awful feeling that I wanted something. But the sad thing was it didn't make the slightest difference when I managed to get what I had wanted. My hunger was just as bad as ever. (LL-206)

Aspects of Som's life are sketched by his family members. His mother suffers everything silently but her love and faith for Krishna never diminishes. She dies of cancer when he was just fifteen. She relied more upon Krishna than on drugs for her cure. In a violent reaction against his mother's irrational belief in lord Krishna, Som happens to sweep the image of gods and goddess off the table in his mother's room this symbolically asserts his rejection for god and faith. His resolve was further strengthened by his father for whom anything to do with god was embarrassing, yet he was a happy man. His father too did not live longer after Som established himself in business. Som is neither devout like his mother nor intrusive like his father. His wife Geeta modern, intelligent

and sophisticated has a trust towards life like birds fly, fish swim. The novelist portrays Geeta as a big giver of herself.

All his life Som seeks someone who has the capacity to resolve the contradiction of life. His meeting with Dr. Leila Sabnis a philosopher and thinker a Michigan educated lady who is an embodiment of reason tries to explain Som's sickness she analyses all Som's problems. She tries to help him by prescribing. "Descartes cage to ergo sum without much success because of the simple reason that one kept the two worlds the world of matter and world of spirit separate". (LL-24)

In *The Last Labyrinth*, Joshi makes use of symbols and myths in order to express the state of mind of the chief protagonist, Som Bhaskar. The symbol of Labyrinth runs throughout the novel often through the use of words like void and darkness, set in the world of mystery and the darkness of human emotions. The void in Som's mind is the psychological labyrinth and his inability to comprehend the depth of spirituality is his spiritual labyrinth. Metaphorically speaking, life itself is a complicated Labyrinth and the hero is puzzled as he has no way to find his path out of this puzzle. Traditional Indian culture and values could have come to his rescue but he is a believer of western ideals which do not bring peace and calm to his mind. He is in search of his own self. He is a successful, wealthy industrialist but finds that money is nothing but dirt. He is a typical upper-class Indian, unable to comprehend his own self; married to Geeta and has two children he has every material possession but there is a "terrible sense of emptiness, discontented, worn-out, weary and incapable of spontaneous feeling"(LL-15). He had no idea what he wanted but wanted,

What is it then? The Terminus? The Last of the Labyrinth... What is this that I had wanted all my life? Was this the answer to the relentless chant "I want, I want". If only one knew what one wanted or may be to know was what I wanted. To know just that no more, no less. This, then, was a Labyrinth too, this going forward and backward and sideways of the mind. Life has become empty and hollow. It is the voids of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without voids of caves and voids of the sky... Why was it so unsatisfying? Or, may be, the Labyrinth hadn't ended. Something lays ahead, something more fundamental than a miracle. (LL-48)

Som Bhasker is battle field between the two hungers of body and spirit and in fight his mind takes the side of his body. His sense of dissatisfaction makes him possessive, of business and a woman. He wants to surpass others in business. Som's wife Geeta fails to comfort his yearning for love and lust. So he is gets attracted by Anuradha, the mistress of another industrialist Aftab Rai. Aftab rai is a man of culture and refinement. He is more rooted in the oriental way of life than western. He lives with Anuradha as man and wife but does not claim any possession of her. Anuradha was born in Bihar sharif of an insane mother who earned her lively hood by singing for her customers. She was once taken away by one of her customer who kills her. Anuradha brought up by her aunts and suffers many humiliating experiences throughout her life and at last Aftab Rai gives a respectable place in his house. Arun Joshi has presented Anuradha as the shakti of Som who leads

him from ignorance to knowledge and enlightens to look into the matter of thing. Som comes to know about Aftab's not being well. Anuradha asks Som to have a night stay in her Haveli but he refuses. Gargi, is a deaf and dumb sadhvi who lives in Banaras on the ghats of Ganga. Her father was a sufi pir who lived with Aftab's father. Aftab and Anuradha introduce Gargi to Som. She writes to Som "Go with her...don't quarrel. She is your shakti (LL-110)". From this point Som gets a moral boost to indulge with Anuradha and he has frequent visits to Lal Haveli. Like other women in his life, he possesses Anuradha physically yet his hunger does not relieve and he is far away from peace and affirmation. His hunger of the body is more aggravated. On the other hand, Anuradha is fed up from Som but she has no way out. She suggests Som: "there is a God up there... In those mountains... There is a temple there. On a hill lined with lepers. You must come with me...God will cure you. (LL-115)". Som is confused: "Cure me of what? A bad heart? Fears? Disappointment? (LL-115)". But deep inside his heart Som knows that he is a leper and he needs cure. Anuradha tries to console him and helps him to overcome but the egoist Som is ravaged by an insane desire to possess her and ignores her efforts to help him cure his spiritual malaise. Som is still haunted by the mysterious questions like "whence and how arose the universe...arose whence comes this creation? Only that God who sees in highest heaven; He only knows whence came this universe (LL-142)". But he must have valid proof. He even doubts Darwin's theory of evolution. He asks Gargi: The point is that the 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 didn't say how we are supposed to evolve further. (LL-120) Anuradha tries to ease his questions, "may be Krishna begins where Darwin left off (LL-90). But Som cannot digest the remark as he is devoid of faith. On the day of Janmastami Anuradha takes him to witness the birth of the lord and pay his respects to him. His coming to the holy city of Banaras is not only to do business but purify his sicken soul. But that doesn't come in an easy way. One has to conquer desires, temptations and anger, in other words edification of human soul by following the path of dharma. Only dharma can guide a man in the meandering path of life. The labyrinth of the world of dreams, illusions, and doubts can be juxtaposed with reality and understanding. On the contrary, he begins to think that all these incoherent ideas are outcome of the city atmosphere; hence elimination of Krishna and such other unbelievable things is necessary to possess Anuradha completely: "It was this city, diseased and bankrupt, wallowing in filth and humbug, it was this city of perversions that stood between me and Anuradha. Until I broke her from its spell, I should never succeed in completely possessing her". (LL-124) He insists Anuradha to join him at Bombay. At first, she refuses but she yields at last to Som's wishes because she does not want to see him in pain and depression. This novel can be seen as a tale of two cities. One is Bombay symbolizing western, rational and industrial whereas Banaras oriental, occult and feudal. Som's affair with Anuradha is at its climatic point and his life as Som also realizes, is about to take a turn. But he had never expected such turn. Som's irresistible passions take him into violent intoxication which further leads to massive heart attack. If Anuradha and Gargi wouldn't come to his rescue under miraculous circumstances his question of survival would come to an end. Anuradha goes to Gargi after Som had the heart attack. She begs Gargi to save him. She reminds that Gargi's father has given Aftab his eye sight then why she could not save Som's life. Gargi in the end agrees to do

the miracle on the condition that Anuradha would give up Som forever. It is like a fire-test for Anuradha but she sacrifices and agrees to go away from Som's life. There after he loses sight of Anuradha and she is out from his life. That had to be the sacrifice for Som's recovery paid by Anuradha. When Anuradha vanishes into Krishna, on the night of Janmashtami, Som is left alone and cries and appeals to Anuradha and prays for God's forgiveness through her:

Anuradha, if there is a 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 doubling of this dark earth and these empty heavens. Plead for me, Anuradha. He will listen to you. (LL-8)

Her absence works on Som's mind differently. When Anuradha leaves him, he becomes hesitant of everything—elevators, bridges, cars, breeze, electric-switches and canned food. He suspects a foul game against him by Aftab. Now all his energies of lust converted into anger and he hatches plans to cripple Aftab's business. He mortgages his plants and lands to purchase the outstanding shares of Aftab's company. Som Bhasker accompanied by his doctor friend Kashyap goes to high mountains to visit the temple of Krishna to acquire the shares of Anuradha. Som risks his life in ascending the high altitude of the mountain where the temple is situated. Here the shares are symbolic of material possession but the chosen journey and destination to possess them is spiritual (The mountain and temple) suggests his paving the path of spirituality without knowing. The snow covered mountain's peak is symbolic of brightness and peace on the top. One goes on the top he would shine like anything would have peace calm and everything that he wants. The glow of enlightenment spreads all around and shuns away darkness. When he reaches the mountain its height, its huge size frightens him and he with his plane crashes down in the mountain. Here he and his plane symbol of materialism which crashed down in spirituality. At the temple to his surprise he sees Gargi. It is through her words he learns how he survived his massive heart attack when medical science is given up all hope for his survival. He laughed at her by saying he was in good hands and what you could do that the doctors could not. Gargi advises Som and write on her pad that God does not work in the simple manner and god does not seek revenge. In the absence to evidence Som intends to challenge the whole thing. He is still after Anuradha's shares to settle a score with her because she deserted him.

Som is tormented by a great roaring hollowness inside the soul. He feels void both within and without. Strange murky images appear in his dreams which are not clear to him. These abstract ideas probably stand for concepts of life, love and death. The emptiness of outer surroundings is symbol of the emptiness in inner self of modern man. The frequent dream of death is symbolic of his fears of death. At night Som dreams that his plane is going to crash into a fiery mountain. This dream is symbolical of his confrontation with lord Krishna. Again his dream in sleep of flying in the sky is outlet of his desire of rising high in life. The appearance of haveli in his

dreams signifies his wish to meet Anuradha, a wish against which he is fighting inwardly. Thus dreams are used to reflect the symbols of god, death, man, love and life of Som.

The labyrinth existing in the Lal haveli in Banaras and its lanes make him conscious of labyrinthine ways of life and death. The images of labyrinth, maze, void, vanity along with certain sordid imagery associated with the animal life emphasize this point in Bhasker's life. The novelist has compared the conflicts of the mind with the Lanes of Benaras and Mumbai. Like them his life is also a blind alley_ "incomprehensible with its meandering and crisscrossing lanes itself a symbol of the universe of the spiritual against the sensual and the mundane symbolized by Mumbai. On a still smaller scale there is a Lal Haveli, Aftab's vast residence eccentrically built as a maze" (LL-35) with its winding stair case and meandering alleys. Aftab Rai's family has a great ancestry. His great grandfather had been a courtier of Wazid Ali Shah and after the mutiny he settled down in Banaras where Lal haveli is erected. Aftab says the haveli was built like a labyrinth because his ancestors baffled their enemies in that way. This mansion is built like a labyrinth which is a central symbol of life and death in this novel. The structure of Lal haveli is a maze with in a maze in the maze like structure of the city of Banaras. Everything about the Lal haveli and its inhabitants seems to be fantasy to the skeptical Bhaskar. The antique beauty Anuradha is as much a mystery as her relations with Aftab. The city and building is the presence of experience of void and spirituality. There are rooms within rooms. Corridors that bring him back to where he started. To Som the maroon blue room of Lal haveli, where he is welcomed by Aftab and Anuradha seems to be the labyrinth and his own inability to free himself proves the prison like character of Lal Haveli. He becomes inseparable from its inhabitants and it is revealed symbolically when Som sees his own image in the portrait of the blue room.

Turning a corner I was started by an apparition. Careworn holding a cigarette in one hand it looked like as it for many centuries it had lived in that bleak house. I started breathless, realizing suddenly that I was starring at my own image. (LL-28)

Inside Lal Haveli there is separate creation the blue room. Like the mind of the man in which is lying a half played game of chess symbolizing the riddle of this world unsolved and in which Som sees his own and many other images in the mirror, the reflections of the multifaceted confusions of life. The complex, mysterious architecture of the haveli becomes a symbol of the confused mind of Som Bhaskar.

It is a feudal structure built like a Labyrinth. The place was bigger that its narrow façade would have led one to believe much bigger. It must have been built over a long period. A room here a verandah there. You could spot the idiosyncrasies of the different builders... a variety of balconies and cornices and patios. Doors of all shapes and color, some carved, others painted in ornate, fading enamel. There were rooms, bright and airy as a gazebo...(LL-29)

Aftab's Lal Haveli the prison like earthly labyrinth, where Som enters and traps himself in a maize without knowing as if he were under a spell. But the actual labyrinth is Anuradha. She is the force that makes Som a captive in that haveli. The attraction of Som for Anuradha which leads their association as partners though he is married and has two daughters and she is unmarried wife. The sight of Anuradha and her mehendi revives his latent passion. His lust after being interaction with Anuradha symbolized with peacock with the unfurled tail woven into the carpet of the room which is given to him where he sleeps with Anuradha.

To Som Bhasker not only the Lal Haveli but the streets and the banks of the Ganga in Banaras and its inhabitants become labyrinthine. Arun Joshi is concerned with the search for the core of life which he has tried to convey through the various symbols. The "Lal Haveli", "Benaras", "Bombay". The narrative of the novel is mostly a table of these two cities represented respectively by Aftab and Bhasker. More over the name Lal haveli too has suggestions of rajoguna, carnality and bloodshed crystallized in the life of its owner Aftab as opposed to satoguna symbolized by high snow clad mountains where Gargi lives.

In this work, alienation, anxiety and absurdity born out of the impact of occidental learning, finally annihilate into oriental faith. The novel provides a unique forum where many opposing forces - namely, faith and doubt, science and religion, illusion and reality, God and death etc are yoked together in order to analyze the complexities of human being. The meaning behind hero's name 'Som Bhaskar' is also based upon this dichotomy which denotes two opposing qualities of the Moon (Som) and the Sun (Bhaskar). Accordingly, the warp and weft of the novel is woven out of the confrontation of various opposing forces that we find in its protagonist. The Last Labyrinth is a symbol of modern Indians hanging between faith and reason, tradition and modernity, native and western ideas. Som Bhaskar depicts the fate of a man who has given up all hope and finds no meaning in his identity, life and survival itself. The novelist suggests that devoid of faith, man is fragile and hollow. Som does not attempt to resolve the contradiction of life through faith. He becomes a spokesman for westernized Indian aristocracy which has lost its spiritual roots. A mere rational approach to life is not sufficient. The labyrinths of life can be resolved through intuition and faith rather than science and reason.

Som's spiritual, quest in the last part of the novel signifies a yet another meaning of the last labyrinth. He slowly recognizes the existence of god when he does penance after his wasteful indulgent life. Som's journey towards the temple at the mountains to encounter Krishna symbolizes his attempt towards reaching his soul. The darkness of the lapsed soul is overweight of affairs of kama. Gargi, Anuradha and Geeta know what he needs is not kama, but moksha. Everybody wants to waken his soul from darkness to light. Ultimately the last labyrinth turns out to be the realization of the existence of god or the death of the body and consequent liberation of the soul. In the whole process of journey of human soul from the darkness of maya to renunciation the novelist's emphasis is on practical philosophy of kharmayoga which does not aim at giving up worldly affairs but continuing to perform in such a way that they do not create any difficulty in the matter of obtaining release. All this overall complexity has shown through dense imagery and highly symbolism.

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