

## A Study of Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* in the Context of Bhagavadgita's Bhakti Yoga

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### Abstract

The Bhagavadgita is a foundational text that discusses in detail three significant paths — *Jnana* (knowledge), *Karma* (action), and *Bhakti* (devotion). It is a text which has an application value beyond time, space, and language because of its uniqueness, originality, infiniteness, and permanence. *Bhakti* yoga aims to achieve spiritual realization by following the path of righteousness followed by selfless devotion and employs the method of 'intuitive understanding of the self'. *The Last Labyrinth* echoes Hindu Philosophy as interpreted in the Scriptures of the Upanishads and the Gita. This paper emphasizes the concept of *Bhakti yoga* and the analysis of textual reading of the Gita, its philosophical constraints, and critical features of Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*. This paper also investigates the binary oppositions of existentialism and realism, isolation, detachment, spiritual uprootedness, identity crisis, cultural alienation, and loss of tradition through the writings of Arun Joshi. Due to the suffering, complexities, and disorder of modern times, this paper introduces intuitive knowledge, devotion, and righteousness as the practical solution to modern-day problems by revisiting the Indian Philosophy discoursed in the Bhagavadgita.

**Keywords:** *Bhakti* Yoga, the Bhagavadgita, Indian Epistemology, Intuitive Knowledge, Existentialism.

### Introduction

The Gita, initially written in the Sanskrit language in seven hundred verses, is a part of the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*, an ancient '*Ithihas*' that took literary form between the fifth century B.C.E. and the third century. It dates between 200 BCE and 200 CE. The *Mahabharata*, the epic *Ramayana*, and the eighteen *Puranas* are called *smriti* (the remembered tradition), distinct from *shruti* (the heard or revealed practice). It was passed orally from one generation to the next, almost as *shruti*. The Gita contains eighteen chapters (from chapters twenty-three to forty) of the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, attributed to four principal characters - Dhritarashtra, Sanjya, Arjun, and Lord Krishna. It is set as a narrative framework of a dialogue between *Pandava* Arjuna and Krishna, in the backdrop of a battlefield, of an expected battle between the five *Pandava* brothers and their cousins, the *Kauravas*, who have cheated the *Pandavas* of their rightful kingdom.

The Gita is the infinite storehouse of knowledge; it takes the message of Upanishads, the highest spiritual teachings of Vedas, in a more practical and concentrated way. The ancient Vedic canonical literature being threefold consists

of the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavadgita. Vedic literature is the spiritual realizations of the *Rishis* and ever-existing spiritual truths written in the ancient Sanskrit language. Upanishads are the foundation and source of knowledge for Vedanta. Shankaracharya, in Introduction to *Katha Upanishad* in his *Bhashya*, defines Upanishads as “*Atman Vidya* and *Brahman Vidya*” (*Bhagavad Gita with Commentaries* 3) or the knowledge of the ‘Self’ to set one free from *Samskaras*, “As the traditional chapter titles put it, the Gita is *Brahma vidya yoga shastra*, a textbook on the supreme science of yoga” (Easwaran 48). The Brahma Sutras are the logical argumentation and aphorisms of various Upanishads.

The Gita's approach to spiritual life is fourfold: *Jnana* yoga, *Karma* yoga, *Raja* yoga, and *Bhakti* yoga. The Gita is structured in a specific format of identifying problems, analyzing solutions, and stating its methods and techniques. For example, suppose the problem is ignorance of knowledge of the infinite existence of self-awareness. In that case, the applied solution to the above problem is acquiring the proper knowledge, which can be attained through *Jnana* Yoga. Similarly, if the problem is a lack of focus and concentration, then the solution is meditation and control of the mind, which can be attained through *Raja* Yoga. If the problem is the impurity of the mind, the key is the purification of the mind which can be achieved through *Karma* Yoga. *Bhakti* yoga is the only method to reinforce the purity of mind and heart. Yoga of Devotion is a

powerful way to attain purity of life and focus because desires can block enlightenment, and purification of the heart is necessary for settling desires. Ignorance can be replaced with proper knowledge through *Jnana* yoga resulting in sanctification of the mind. Still, the heart's purification can be paid for only with devotion and love for God. The heart grants the purity of faith, whereas the reason grants the perception to grasp intuitive knowledge. However, the essence of all the above forms of yoga (*Jnana*, *Karma*, *Raja*, *Bhakti*) lies in practice or *abhyasa*. Without training or *abhyasa*, the process of spiritual realization is meaningless and a wasted effort.

The textual study of sacred texts has functioned through human history and surpassed time, space, and language barriers. The textual research focuses on understanding and analyzing religious influences on human experiences. The study of religion and the Scriptures remains a vital force in our complex and constantly changing world. The study of the Scriptures is one way to study theology. Hindu Scriptures have stayed at the core of the dynamic exchanges of the practices that local Indian cultures have shaped. An Indian culture is an integrated approach to life, incorporating philosophy's mental, physical, and spiritual aspects. Indian philosophy is therefore embedded within Indian culture. The fundamental beliefs of “Indian philosophy consists of three basic beliefs” (Dasgupta 71). First, faiths in Karma theory, i.e., past actions determine the present joy or suffering, and current

actions accordingly determine the future. The second belief is the existence of an *atman* or soul, an eternal entity i.e true and unknown nature of one's self. The third belief is the doctrine of liberation or *Mukti*, i.e., liberating oneself from the endless cycles of birth and death. Another unique feature of Indian philosophy is the freedom of acceptance to multiple paths leading to liberation. The Gita focuses upon these three beliefs and suggests a possible solution to liberate oneself by attaining any *Marga* or path of yoga (*Jnana*, *Karma*, *Bhakti*) in accordance with one's temperament and societal position.

Some by meditation, behold the supreme spirit in the heart with the help of their refined and sharp intellect; others realize it through the the discipline of knowledge, and still others, through the field of Action, i.e., Karma Yoga. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 13.24)

Hence the Indian philosophy of practicing self-realization has been advanced in modern times by Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, J. Krishnamurti, and M.K. Gandhi, etc. these contemporary philosophers have interpreted ancient wisdom of knowledge about existing present socio-cultural context. Therefore, according to Aurobindo in *Essays on the Gita*, the Gita in its foundation is a Vedantic work:

It is mainly intellectual, ratiocinative, philosophical in its method, founded indeed on the Truth, but not the directly inspired

word which is the revelation of the Truth through the higher faculties of the seer, . . . It is, in fact, primarily a practical system of yoga that it teaches, and it brings in metaphysical ideals only as explanatory of its functional method. (Aurobindo 68)

### **The Last Labyrinth in Context of the Bhagavad-Gita's Bhakti Yoga**

The *Bhakti Yoga*, or Yoga of Devotion, speaks of God's realization through the practice of meditation and sacrifice. *Bhakti yoga* aims to provide pure devotional service to Lord Krishna; it is the highest and most suitable means for attaining pure love for Krishna, the highest end of spiritual existence. This yoga states that whenever the action is taken, it should be in worship and sacrifice, where sacrifice must be rooted in prescribed action appropriate to his varna in society regarding him as present in the whole universe. *The Last Labyrinth* is the text of an argument between scientific realism and existential spiritualism. The confusion of the complex philosophy of matter and spirit can be cleared and satisfied by attaining the proper knowledge accompanied by selfless devotion. The passion of an unsatisfied self can only be happy by following the path of devotion (*Bhakti*), as depicted by Anuradha and Gargi in *The Last Labyrinth*.

The '*karmic*' principles of detachment and action on the pattern of *The Bhagavad Gita* as shown in *The Apprentice*, and the ceaseless longing for the essence of life being obsessed with a latent quest for "a great force, kraft" as

observed in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Thus, the concourse of the 'Triveni' in the form of the mystical urge of the Som Bhaskar is presented in his constant longing for the vitals of life and existence. (Dwivedi 113)

Arun Joshi is one of the most distinguished Indian English novelists. Arun Joshi expresses himself through distinct themes, culture, myths, tradition, indigenous language, and images based upon Indian ethe and Hindu Vedas and scriptures, like the Upanishads and the Gita. *The Last Labyrinth* deals with the Hindu philosophy of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*. The ultimate aim of Indian philosophy and Joshi's novel is to evade the *Maya* or illusion and attain salvation or *moksha* by understanding the difference between transient and permanent through the proper knowledge or *Jnana*.

Arun Joshi received Sahitya Akademi Award for his fourth book, *The Last Labyrinth*, in 1983. His novel *The Last Labyrinth* echoes Hindu Philosophy as interpreted in the Scriptures of the Upanishads and the Gita. According to Sujatha Mathai in *I am a Stranger to my Books* (1983), "Joshi feels that his ethos is essentially Hindu" Joshi strongly believes in the theory of *karma*, and *karmic* law forms the core foundation of Joshi's existential philosophical approach. According to Arun Joshi, one's existence should be an effort towards a conscious, aware, and proper way of living. Joshi reflects Hinduism as an existentialist-

oriented philosophy in its basic structure, where the right way to live is a prerequisite.

One should lift oneself by one's efforts and should not degrade oneself; for one's self-self is one's friend, and one's self-self is one's enemy. (*Srimad Bhagavad-Gita* 6.5)

*The Last Labyrinth* deals with a man's endorsement with four stages: *dharma* (duty), *Artha* (wealth), *kama* (lust), and *moksha* (salvation). The novel's ultimate goal is the attainment of *moksha* by crossing the barriers of passion, wealth, and fame. The story is deeply immersed in Hindu philosophy and thoughts. The hero of the novel Som Bhaskar has an insatiable hunger for physical, mental, material, and spiritual desires. He seeks substitutes in lust, wealth, and fame but grows increasingly restless. Som inherits faith in religion and love for Krishna from his mother. Science and religion create a strain on him and torture him. Thus, Som becomes a Labyrinth within himself, full of inner disharmony. He hears mysterious voices and songs, "I want, I want, I want. / / I want, I want, I want, just like that?" (Joshi 70). *The Last Labyrinth* reflects the discipline of devotion by complete surrender. It follows the principle of *karma yoga* dominated by request to worship and sacrifice, where sacrifice itself is rooted in prescribed action.

The journey of Som is symbolically the journey of finding one's soul and *atman*, or the existence of human life. Similarly, Som's mystical urge to search for his identity or existence symbolizes his

desire for Anuradha. By the end of the text, we visualize the journey of Som getting cleared of a labyrinth of reason and scientific temper by entering into realms of faith and belief. He encounters the change within himself, "now he has moved on the right path that will lead to the destination, the realization. He knows that God should be realized, not learned, and that realization is a continuous process of attainment by constant efforts" (Dwivedi 127). Som argues with Anuradha about the existence of spirit and questions the evolution of spirit, which Darwin has never pointed upon. Anuradha then suggests Som, Darwin is not the final say, "Maybe Krishna begins where Darwin left off" (Joshi132). Som discovered gradually from Anuradha and Gargi that all actions performed can be an offering to Lord Krishna.

With your mind thus established in the yoga of renunciation (offering of all actions to Me), you will be freed from the bondage of action in the shape of good and evil results; thus freed from them, you will attain Me. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 9.28)

Further, Som's journey towards the mountains in search of Lord Krishna is crucial; this journey indicates suffering as a key element to reaching one's soul or identity. The gradual development of Som's soul is represented through his suffering and pain that acts as a catalyst in churning the essence of 'Self' in him, "Its perfect stillness could hypnotize. I had heard of people who, staring into such flames, had enjoyed the Eternal Bliss...others had

discovered their oneness with the Brahman...a man I once traveled with . . . claimed he had seen in such a flame his previous incarnations" (Joshi 210).

Arun Joshi presents the Indian cultural heritage through the metaphors of the spiritual land Benaras and the Holy Ganges. The shadow images of various religious cults like the Bhakti Movement, Sufi Cult, Vedanta, and Buddhism appear in some form. The Ganges appear in Aftab's discussions, and for the background of his Lal Haveli, "felt as though this was not Ganga but some unknown stream, in some unknown segment of Universe leading to a reality that I had not known" (Joshi 44). Its ghats signify the profound, mysterious reality of the universe, and its touch carries the healing powers of purity and faith. The Ganges, silence, and holy waters reinstate one from all sins of past and present births.

Arjuna, I am the sap in water and the radiance of the moon and the sun; I am the sacred syllable O.M.O.M. in all the Vedas, the sound in ether, and virility in men. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 7.8)

Som's mystical craving remains alienated and dislocated, "I am dislocated. My mind is out of focus" (Joshi 107). Unlike Joshi's other characters, Billy, Sindi, and Ratan, Som remains tangled up in the labyrinths of confusion and doubt and does not progress from alienation to existentialism like other characters. "He finally loses himself in the labyrinths of life and death like Abhimanyu lost in the "Chakravyuha" of "The Mahabharata" (Dwivedi 131). Som finally vanishes in the

*Chakravyuha* of *Maya*, "Bhaskar is a modernized, secularized, empiricism, skeptical *Nachiketa* who has been denied the faith and resolution of the *Upanishadic* model" (Parsad 238).

Bhaskar's crisis is not a crisis of emotion or ethics: it is a crisis of consciousness. The march of human evolution and development of civilizations down the ages have brought the modern man to a point of consciousness where he can neither believe nor refuse to believe . . . Bhaskar's dilemma lies deep down in his self-self and consciousness. It is not the outer world within, the subjective reality that is essentially the fountain-spring of despair and anxiety. (Prasad 238-239)

Bhaskar's clogged mind limits his intuitive knowledge and faith. Finally, Som realizes the increased gap between the self-self and reality, which is the core problem of not achieving the redemption or existential element in the text. Som's self-self is burdened with alienation, anxiety, confusion, and melancholia, "strange mad thoughts: are they the harbingers, the pilot-escort, of melancholia? Of insanity? Of Faith?" (Joshi, 2015, p. 223). Bhaskar's constant search for the validity and meaning of insanity and faith devoid him of intuitive knowledge, faith, and devotion.

Arvind Nawale, in his essay '*Return to Nature*,' elucidates Joshi's characters as a

predicament for simple life against modern rationalism where they are preoccupied with reconfiguring the "natural mode of existence" (Nawale, 2010, p. 51) against the rationality of modern life. Nawal's essay also depicts the post-independence modernization in India and its ensuing spiritual up rootedness as the crux of Joshi's literary predicament, "Modern malaise of 'rootlessness,' 'powerlessness,' 'normlessness,' 'cultural estrangement,' 'social isolation and 'social estrangement' " (Sharma 105) are crucial factors determining Joshi's literary characters. According to K.D Verma, Joshi's writing depicts his disdain for the modern lifestyle, where the only refuge left is that of finding solace through escaping from realities of the "object world" (Verma 71-7). The existential problems of Rattan Rathore in *The Apprentice* (1974) are reflected and magnified in the character of Som Bhaskar in *The Last Labyrinth* (1981).

Both characters confront the same problems of alienation and identity, with one significant difference: whereas Rattan Rathore finds an answer to his moral guilt and returns to the community, Som Bhaskar fails to find answers to his moral and cultural alienation and cannot return to society. The tragedy of Som Bhaskar is the tragedy of the modern man who, being at odds with himself and his cultural environment, is confronted

by moral and psychological fragmentation and by a persistent struggle between two worlds, two types of hunger: "Hunger of the body. Hunger of the spirit." (Verma 44)

According to P.V Malreddy, Joshi's work can be identified and read in four conceptual parts. Firstly, comparison between Joshi and Western literary movements, that is, existentialism and realism. Joshi's writings are inspired by Albert Camus, Joseph Conrad, Eugene O'Neill, and T.S Eliot's work in the west. Joshi's characters desire a vague account of western exposure to a foreign land and simultaneous confusion over the modern Indian culture. "Joshi's characters are well-educated, representing the so-called 'upper crust' of Indian society who nevertheless are unpredictable, if not irrational" (Meitei 88-90). Secondly, colonialism operates at all possible levels of Joshi's writing; the existential aspect or the purpose of life resembles colonial bearing, where Joshi constantly works to reframe the postcolonial Indian setting. *The City and The River* (1990) and *The Apprentice* (1974) unfold the postcolonial aspect of existential philosophy. Thirdly, a study of the philosophical ideas of Joshi makes reading complex and philosophical ideas seem lost in decoding the narrative techniques from autodiegetic to heterodiegetic narration and various monologues. Fourthly, the formal-aesthetic experimentation of Joshi's writing is distinct from his predecessors and successors. Joshi's narrative technique and the literary

quest can be read as experimental, where the concept of exploring one's 'Self' with Indian Philosophical ideas takes the uppermost position.

Joshi is the first avant-garde figure in Indian English literature before the arrival of magical realism, the language of hybridity, and other postcolonial or postmodern tropes in the 1980s. In that respect, Joshi accounts for the migration of the Indian English novel using his own diasporic experience represented through his characters. (Malreddy 8)

Hence, Arun Joshi is a great psychological artist with an insight to see life beyond the rational mind of mere existence. A life of self-awareness, a conscious mind, and a responsible existence. His protagonists sought after the questions of life, searching for the 'Self' and inner calling.

Modern man is a machine, an automaton having no heart, no fellow feeling. He is torn by a dual code of behavior and hives lazily "by opportunism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy, and wit." These absurd situations give rise to existentialist emotions, which Joshi has dealt with in the themes of his novels. In all his novels, he unravels the facets of identity crisis in modern

man's life. His protagonists are essentially foreigners wherever they go. They happen to be walking metaphors of alienation. (Dwivedi 32)

*The Last Labyrinth* can be read as an existential philosophy based on the loss of tradition, detachment, and nihilism, "it is the voids of the world, more than its objects, that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without" (Joshi 42). Joshi's characters desire a vague account of western exposure to a foreign land and simultaneous confusion over the modern Indian culture. The two contrasting worlds of western and mystical Indian culture represent the two inner selves of Som Bhaskar; his father, Bombay, Leela Sabnis, and Dr. K represent the western world of science, reason, and rationality. On the other hand, Som's mother, Benaras, Aftab, Sufi Pir, Anuradha, Gargi, and Geeta, project the world of love, faith, intuition, spirituality, and harmony.

Som represents a modern man in search of himself. Arun Joshi, the novelist of *The Last Labyrinth*, reveals himself as a man who is convinced that Western values do not provide peace, certitude, and sublimity of self-fulfillment. Traditional Indian culture and values lying dormant in the darkest recesses of his mind now cry for the fulfillment, and the novelist is captivated by the

mysterious and the unseen. (Prasad 89)

### Conclusion

Arun Joshi explores the philosophical theme of Indian tradition and culture. The characters of Joshi find themselves engulfed in dilemmas of cultural, moral, and psychological issues and torn apart by two different worlds of appearance and reality. Joshi's mode of experiment with writing explores the diverse facets of alienated, isolated, internally divided modern complex man. *The Last Labyrinth* reflects the discipline of devotion by complete surrender. It follows the principle of *karma* yoga dominated by devotion to worship and sacrifice, where sacrifice itself is rooted in prescribed action. Joshi, in this novel, suggests that 'understanding' achieved through suffering and pain can only bring meaning to the mysteries of life. The Labyrinth of life is just like the layers of soul clad in the dust, dirt, and ignorance which can be attained through knowledge, awareness, suffering, and devotion. By the end of the text, we visualize the journey of Som getting cleared of a labyrinth of reason and scientific temper by entering into realms of faith and belief. Due to the suffering, complexities, and disorder of modern times, this paper introduces intuitive knowledge, devotion, and righteousness as the practical solution to modern-day problems by revisiting the Indian Philosophy discoursed in the Bhagavadgita. The symbolic expression of the text uncovers the philosophy of existence, love, devotion, and sacrifice. The journey of Som Bhaskar symbolically represents the journey of finding one's soul



and *atman*, or the existence of human life. *Bhakti* yoga, therefore, can be read as the last step to lead to *moksha* or liberation. However, *Bhakti* cannot be reached alone without practicing *Karma* and *Jnana* Yoga.

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