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Imagining the future is a kind of nostalgia: Revisiting mythological teachings of India in Arun Joshi's 'The Last Labyrinth'

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Abstract--The paper in consideration talks about the impact of Indian philosophy in The Last Labyrinth. The paper opens various avenues on which the novel draws inspiration from the Indian Upanishadic traditions and how the actions of the characters reflect the influence of Indian Mythological Legends. The paper throws light upon the prevalent themes of Hindu Dharmic traditions that became the base for action in the novel. Having studied the life and actions of the characters like Som Bhaskar, Anuradha, Aftab, Mansoor, Amzad; the paper explores the relationship between their acts and the underlying Upanishadic implications. The paper also explores the role of an omniscient narrator who sets the tone for the action of the novel. The power further talks about Joshi's Hindu psyche that was prevalent all along the novel through the actions of his characters like Bhaskar's performing last rites of his father, names of the places like Haridwar, and reference to Hindu gods like Som Bhaskar's mother's prayers to Krishna. The paper shows how the personalities in the novel are not only characters but the personality types and how important was the conception of God.

Keywords--Hindu, impact, life, mythology, philosophy, tradition.

Introduction

The richest elements of Indian culture lie in its mythology, which develops it further and makes it a distinctive one in the universe. Since ancient times, mythology has been widely used and admired by all. When reminiscing about his or her regional literature, everybody loves to return to the Indian setting and backdrop. A wide segment of readers has been mesmerised and captivated by the mythological trend in Indian English literature or regional literature. The present day Indian writers are into an altogether different genre due to the massive proportions, atmosphere, and idea of joint families. The contemporary modern writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, S. Tharoor, Arundhati Roy, Arun Joshi, Kiran Desai, and Jhumpa Lahri have all reintroduced mythology into their works on a regular basis. In contemporary Indian literature, symbolism and overt parallels to myths have been the driving force. Arun Joshi the author of five novels, written mainly during the 1970s, won the Sahitya Akademi award for his penultimate book, *The Last Labyrinth* (The Hindu, Aditya, 2013). Joshi deals with the unending disparities of the relationship between men and power and mythic truths. (Yadav, 2019).

The entire idea of mythology draws its genesis from the epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the Indian Literary traditions. Indian literature is replete with mythological characters and their portrayals have also found great relevance to contemporary Indian society. In Arun Joshi's fiction, Lord Krishna's recitation of the Bhagvada - Gita to Arjuna has been widely praised. *The Last Labyrinth* is a legendary journey that explores the quest for "Reality." Joshi believes in the Freudian logic of intellectual production, which transcends dream and reality. There are clear references to Krishna, Buddha, Tukaram, and even Yajnavalkya, whom he alludes to in an Upanishadic citation, on multiple occasions throughout *The Last Labyrinth*. (Rani, pp. 3-4).

In his creative career many things influenced Arun Joshi. The influence of the Hindu scriptures like The Upanishads, The Bhagvada Gita and the philosophy of Vedas influence him. He was also influenced by Mahatma Gandhi or he admitted that the Hindu philosophy influenced him most abidingly. There is no denying fact that Arun Joshi was immensely influenced by Indian religious thinkers. His first two novels are primarily dealing (or focused on) with religious issues and delves deep into Hindu psyche. Arun Joshi sought to portray the Indian view of life in his novels and short stories. He admitted before the interviewer, Piciucco that there is a "special viewpoint, which I have known all my life" (Piciucco p. 89). An Indian existential viewpoint adumbrated in Joshi. As a true Hindu, he believed in the concept of rebirth, until a true nirvana of a soul is attained. The same has been included in *The Bhagavad Geeta*-

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचि- त्त्रायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो- न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥ 20 ॥
(Bhagavad Geeta: Chapter 1,verse 20)

They are where your own life has aligned with the divine will. This is also called yoga” (Piciucco 90). The Bhagavad Geeta further elaborates thus-

श्रुतिविप्रतिपन्ना ते यदा स्थास्यति निश्चला |
समाधावचला बुद्धिस्तदा योगमवाप्स्यसि || 53 ||
śhruti-vipratipannā te yadā sthāsyati niśhchalā
samādhāv-achalā buddhis tadā yogam avāpsyasi
(Bhagavad Geeta: Chapter 2,verse 53)

Joshi wanted to emphasize the fact that the ills of modern society result from man’s inability to realize God in his life. The materialistic culture of the modern man has much to do with the loss of God. The Upanishads and the Gita are mainly responsible for his God-fearing attitude. Arun Joshi was a great Indian English novelist who drew attention to the human plight caused by inner crises in today’s world. An intellectual writer, Arun Joshi addresses himself to the very essence of being in a world that is confronted with spiritual vacuum and moral bankruptcy. (Das, 2015, pp-1-2). He focused on socioeconomic or present political themes in his work *The Last Labyrinth*, but he also methodically picked up on the profound and highly sensitive features of human characters. The works of Joshi show the strong influence of the spiritual ideology of Indian culture. Among the contemporary novelists, he was one of those fictionists who by their protagonists, tried effectively to reflect eternal metaphysics and ethos.

The recognition of myth in a narrative gives a punch to the reading experience. It can be said that as a nation the Indians are still closer to mythology and most Indian epics are nothing but the collective unconscious of the whole nation. P. Lal rightly says: “Without an absorption in the myths of the lands of one’s forefathers it isn’t even possible to live a meaning life” (1997, p. 17). In using myth as a structural parallel one often notices a mythical situation underlying the whole novel or a part of it. As a digressional method, we find a weaving of story within a story like the stories that we find in *The Panch Tantra*, *The Vishnupurana*, *The Ramayan*, and *The Mahabharata*. Arun Joshi’s five novels are classic in terms of themes and patterns. In its handling of a subtle Indian motive, the *Last Labyrinth* is unrivalled and focuses on the importance of the Hindu philosophy advocated by holy writings such as *Gita* and the *Upanishads*. The story follows a person who is torn between the four ways of life: *Dharma* (responsibility), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (desire), and *Moksha* (enlightenment) (liberation). The entire reliance on *karma yoga* is the attainment of soul liberty by forsaking the six adversaries of man, *Kama* (desire), *krodh* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *moha* (allurement), *Mada* (lust), and *Aiswarya* (pride). The Hindu religious books have a deep influence on the book, with Hindu *sastras* guiding the events.

All of these are Hindu life's basics, which serve as the framework for *The Last Labyrinth*, from character formation to the underlying currents and cross-sections of the entire structure. This novel is based on the *Upanishads*. The novel *The Last Labyrinth* is about a person's journey from the temporal to the eternal. The novelist focuses on the two conflicting famines, “Hunger of the body, Hunger of the spirit”, proposes the way of salvation for mankind. He writes: Your body is God’s chariot, says Tuka Ram” (Joshi Arun, 1981,p. 10) The idea has been derived from the *Kathopanisad*:

‘आत्मानं रथिनं विद्धि शरीरं रथमेव तु।
 बुद्धिं तु सारथिं विद्धि मनः प्रग्रहमेव च॥
 इन्द्रियाणि हयानाहुःवष्यांस्तेषु गोचरान्।
 आत्मेन्द्रियमनोयुक्तं भोक्तेत्याहुर्मनीषिणः॥’

Atmanam rathinam viddhi shariram rathmeva hi,
 Indriyam hayam dhuh manah pragrahmeva cha.
 (Kathopanisad 3/3)

To have a balanced personality the mind is to be kept under control, and the control of mind, though difficult, is to be done through two things, i.e. practice and renunciation. Lord Krishna says to Arjuna in the Gita: “The karma yoga presupposes equilibrium through the equation of Dharma, Artha, and Kama. Once this harmony is attained, the path to Moksha is smooth, and the final renunciation of the body, the chariot of the soul, takes place in full realization of the ultimate Soul”. (Bhagavad Geeta)

Som always suffers from an intense feeling of rootlessness in life. Geeta, his wife is a pious woman and trustworthy for him. But he is at the same time is mesmerized by the glamour of Anuradha, an alluring woman. She accepts, rejects, or flees from him silently. He discovers that Anuradha promised to sacrifice her love for him in order to save him from death after a heart attack, but he is sceptical. Som has a mounting passion for Anuradha. He likes her passionately but he could not win her and consequently becomes frustrated. His zealous search for Anuradha brings him to her haveli, but she vanishes in the last labyrinth, leaving him to wonder if she committed suicide or was murdered. He feels completely alone and continues to express his emotions to her in the form of a prayer.

Som realizes his sins and seeks pardon from God. He pleads to Anuradha: “Anuradha, listen to me where you are. Is there God where you are? ... Anuradha my soul, tell him, tell this God to have mercy upon me” ((Joshi Arun, 1981,p. 223). Meaninglessness in life and complete despair compel him to commit suicide ‘to have a peaceful death’ ((Joshi Arun, 1981,p. 164). Geeta, his wife, intervenes as he tries to commit suicide. As a result, his loving and intellectual wife is the only person who can bring him happiness. Som is the synthesis of impulse and intellect, two opposing human powers. The essential thematic basis of the work leads to this blending of two opposing parts of human nature. Som responds with a sense of immediacy to instinct, which is the fundamental root of kama. His logic enables him to look for proof of God's existence. He becomes a "sad man" ((Joshi Arun, 1981,p. 56) encircled by the world of Maya and voids, losing his head and unable to steer himself in the direction of the true path, i.e., Dharma. Leela Sabnis rightly regards him as “A man so successful, so successful, so intelligent”, and asks. “Why should such a man be so confused”? ((Joshi Arun, 1981, p.79). Similar annotation is in Bhagavad Geeta:

कार्पण्यदोषोपहतस्वभावः, पृच्छामि त्वां धर्मसम्मूढचेताः ।
 यच्छ्रेयः स्यान्नश्नितं ब्रूहि तन्मे, शिष्यस्तेऽहं शाधि मां त्वां प्रपन्नम् ॥ 7 ॥
 (Bhagavad Geeta: Chapter 3,verse 18)

"...may be what you seek is a mystical identity, identification with a godhead, like most Hindus crave, sooner or later," she continues, explaining his voids and their

causes and effects (Joshi Arun, 1981,p. 113). Anuradha, Gargi, and even Geeta admit that everything Som desires is moksha, not Kama. Anuradha is implying to Som that I will not fit into your quest since I am not the type of person you seek. "I know," she says again. You're looking for something. You have a strong desire for something. That was obvious the first time we met. It isn't, however, me. I can see that as well. In the dargah, I told you so" ((Joshi Arun, 1981,p. 58-59). From the darkness to light, everybody wants to wake his soul. Hence, the root of the novel in the Dharma, that true faith can overcome the problems of worldly affairs and of the temporal values of life. As it is stated in the Bhagavad Geeta:

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् |
 धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे || 8 ||
 paritrāṇāya sādṛhūnām vināshāya cha duṣhkṛitām
 dharma-sansthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge
 (Bhagavad Geeta: Chapter 4,verse 8)

The novel does not resolve Bhaskar's dilemma; it enacts. Bhaskar is a product of two worlds: science and rationalism in the West, and faith and transcendentalism in India. Both the worlds 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 sign of the indescribable, elusive, and life-spirit in a woman, as well as the highest gift of Hinduism, the spirit of sacrifice. Anuradha is a saint-sinner-adulteress filled with love and compassion, similar to Sarah in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Krishna appears in different forms, including Krishna on the closet shelf in Anuradha's mother's room, Krishna whom Anuradha's mother believes to have married, and Krishna whom Anuradha presents to Bhaskar in the form of a silver figurine. Krishna, whom Anuradha finds in the purple hills, and Krishna, in the form of a blue flame, at the temple. Descartes, Kant, Darwin, Freud, and Jung spelled out the Western world; Bombay, Leela Sabnis, and Anuradha, Gargi, Benares, and Krishna spelled out the Indian spiritual world of religion. This is the genuine plight of an Indian with a Western upbringing and education. Arun Joshi has his education abroad and he stayed for quite some time there imbibing in his thoughts the ways of the Western world. Both the hero and the writer are made out of these dual forces. Arun Joshi reveals in his talk with Sujata Mathai (*The Times of India*) that he was influenced both by Camus and other existential writers as well as by Gandhi and the Bhagavad-Gita. Indian life is covered with the teachings of Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita that he is everywhere and in everything. The presence of Krishna in the mother's room, in the human forms of the dancing pair on the Janmasthan in Benaras, in the mountains, in the blue flame burning for ages is an implicit demonstration of the essence of Indian spiritual heritage that the Brahma, (God) is in every atom.

The Bhaskar's dilemma is born at the meeting point of the Western and Indian ethos. In fact, he finds himself lost in the labyrinths. The Bhaskar's situation is of absurdity but he is not like Camus' Meursault indifferent and dead to all that happens around him. He wants to know. She reminds him of Spinoza when Leela Sabnis quotes Descartes, stating that both spirit and matter were welcomed by God and flowed from Him. He wants to learn about the God in the hills from Anuradha in the guest room and tells Gargi directly: "No, don't misunderstand

me. I want to know. Probably, I want to believe But one can't order belief" ((Joshi Arun, 1981, p. 213). Bhaskar isn't only a modern-day Hamlet torn between being and not being; Arun Joshi adds to his predicament by asking him to believe or not believe. He reminds me of Abhimanyu from The Mahabharat, who can't seem to get out of Chakravyuha. Bhaskar loses himself in the Chakravyuha of life and death, reality and truth, doubt and trust. In his attempt to understand the cosmic riddle, Bhaskar is a modernised, secularised, empiricalised, sceptical Najiketa who was denied the faith and resolution of the Upanishadic model.

A notable feature of Arun Joshi's heroes is that while they are highly placed both by training and by profession in the society. They are individuals who have a very rich life and instinct to an unconscious link with the original picture of the world. Som searching for a labyrinth within the labyrinth. Som's wild hunt for physical pleasure reason hardly enters, and, again, when he talks of God his intellect seeks the proof of the existence of God. This amounts to his disbelief in God or His existence is beautifully described in the Bhagavad Geeta:

न त्वेवाहं जातु नासं न त्वं नेमे जनाधिपा ।
 न चैव न भविष्यामः सर्वे वयमतः परम् ॥ 12 ॥
 na tvevāhaṁ jātu nāsaṁ na tvaṁ neme janādhipāḥ
 na chaiva na bhaviṣhyāmaḥ sarve vayamataḥ param
 (Bhagavad Geeta: Chapter 3,verse 8)

He attributes the death of his mother to her wrong faith in Krishna, which prevented others from taking her to a hospital to cure her cancer. Later he comes to know that Anuradha's mother also was a victim of the same false faith in Krishna. When she said that she was married to Krishna, the man in a fit killed her with a broken whisky bottle. He is experiencing stress, discontent, disruption, hysteria, tantrum, neurosis, bizarre dreams, and insomnia, while everyone else around him is pleased, even in the face of suffering and death. His mother was never grieved by the prospect of death; rather, she relished life, believing that the wooden picture of Krishna would save and cure her. There are numerous references to Krishna, the Buddha, Tukaram, and Yajnavalkya in The Last Labyrinth, including the following Upanishadic quotation:

When the Sun is set and the Moon is also set and the fire has also sunk down and the voice is silent, what, then Yajnavalkya is the light of man? ((Joshi Arun, 1981, p. 108)

Joshi's Hindu psychology prompts him to mention Bhaskar performing his father's funeral rites at Hardwar. Several Hindu gods and goddesses have been mentioned. "Heavy-lipped Brahma, Rudra with snakes and a third eye, Vishnu almost effeminate," says Bhaskar of the Trimurti monument at Elephanta Caves (Joshi Arun, 1981, p. 46). "I sense wrath whipping from the end of my spine and shooting up with the skull, to some dark hollows where the serpent rested just waiting to be stirred," Som Bhaskar says of the latent Kundalini power (Joshi Arun, 1981, p.29). Som Bhaskar speculates on what Yajnavalkya might have said. Joshi's Hindu mentality is shown by Bhaskar executing his father's death rites at Hardwar. There are also references to other Hindu gods. Bhaskar recalls the Trimurti statue at Elephanta Caves:

Heavy lipped Brahma, Rudra with snakes and a third eye; Vishnu almost effeminate.
 ((Joshi Arun, 1981, p. 23)

Som Bhaskar also thinks of the dormant Kundalini power:

I feel rage whipping at the end of my spine, and shooting up with the skull, to some dark hollows where the serpent slept, just waiting to be stirred. ((Joshi Arun, 1981, p. 20)

We can find so many references to the Tantrik cult in *The Last Labyrinth*. Of All the novels of Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth* may have the most repercussions from the different East and West philosophical systems, which deal mainly with the maze of life and death. There are also several references to the Tantrik cult in *The Last Labyrinth*. The novel possibly has the largest re-repercussion on labyrinthine lifestyles and death in the different philosophical systems from East and West. Arun Joshi seems to have a good background in Indian Muslim tradition as well. But this influence is there only in *The Last Labyrinth*. Som Bhaskar, Anuradha and Aftab go to a durgah (Muslim Religious place) in New Delhi after a Plastic Manufacturers' conference. They are guided by one Amzed Mian. The guide tells us about many Islamic saints and thinkers buried there. On the death of Khwaja Qutbuddin mourners sang a song in Persian:

Kushtagane Khanjare taslim ra, Her
Zaman as ghaib digarest

And translated by the author as: When the dagger of submission has killed you, there will come new lives from unseen worlds. The guide also narrates how Mansoor Hallaj put to death raved to the end, 'Ana 'I Haque (I am God). He also guides the visitors through the grave addressing the buried:

Tariquat, Haqiqat, Tawakkul, Sabr,
Khauf, Ishq, Ride, Fana.

Joshi as an omniscient narrator calls Amzad Mian 'a learned man'. The same can also be applied to the case of Arun Joshi, the creator of the character of the episode. Joshi has used his knowledge of philosophy to mould the message of his novels. His characters may be objective entities; nevertheless, they have grown out of the personality of the creator, Arun Joshi. According to Arun Joshi, it is ineffective to pray to God, when he mentioned that Som Bhaskar's mother dies of cancer and that her prayers to Lord Krishna were unhelpful. The narrator: "I told her about how she developed cancer, preferred Krishna to medicines, and died" ((Joshi Arun, 1981, p. 100), clearly, he does not believe in the effectiveness of prayer and considers it as fruitless.

Though you do not believe in any supernatural being, we can appreciate this novel, because in this case, you can consider it a chance - events and the views on the characters are mere opinions. The novelist did so by stating nothing as the occult role and merely by suggesting that the mystic forces may have caused certain incidents. Bhagavad Gita's message quoted by G.A. Ghanshyam and vasumati Nadig is very appropriate in this perspective;

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज |
अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः || 66 ||
sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śharaṇaṁ vraja
ahaṁ tvāṁ sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣhayiṣhyāmi mā śhuchaḥ

(Abandoning all duties, come to me alone for shelter. Be not grieved, for I shall release thee from all evils). (BG 18.66)

Very often Joshi places his characters in a multicultural situation and his language reflects the linguistic and cultural multiplicity with which they are endowed. Mumbo-jumbo, pissed off, stuffed shirt, flunked and flushed, off, and other British and American colloquialisms coexist freely with Sanskrit, Hindi, and Urdu words and parses like Dharma, Karma, Maryada, Yajan, Shamiana, and so on. Snippets from Pascal, Descartes, and Kierkegaard flow like Sanskrit 'Slokas' once more. Upanishadic lines, Vedic hymns, and Begum Akhtar or Sehgal melodies are all included. Tribal songs coexist alongside American jazz. However, such an unfettered display of cultural diversity isn't just for show. In the novels, it serves as a practical object. For example, on page 155 of *The Last Labyrinth*, Som's father recites a line from *The Rig Veda* to express his uncertainty in the face of Indian mystics' imprecise, ambiguous responses to the riddle of creation. Joshi, like Raja Rao, who has spent much of his life outside of India, is adamant about maintaining his Indian cultural identity and the Indian way of thinking that informs his material and colours his perspective. His response to experience is conditioned by his Indian grounding.

Conclusion

The novel takes us through various paradigms of Indian Upanishadic traditions. The portrayal of various characters and the underlying intention of their actions truly represent the Upanishadic traditions in the psyche of Arun Joshi. Along with this, the elements of Hindu mythology interprets the novels and their characters more interesting. The religious diversity and the respect shown by the Arun Joshi to all the religions is also worth the mention here. The search for the self and the battle of the individual with the material world is visible throughout the novel. The portrayal of God as omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent is in the background of *The Last Labyrinth*. The constant struggle between the faculty of instinct and reason is portrayed through Som, the central character of the novel.

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