

## Teachings of *Bhagavad Gita* In Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

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**Abstract**

Arun Joshi, an outstanding Indian English novelist has focused on very sensitive layers of human being in his novels. The Last Labyrinth novel reflects the teachings of Bhagavad Gita by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the battle of Kurukshetra to resolve his inner confusions. The Last Labyrinth is a story of state of mind of the people facing human predicaments; it is a story of labyrinth of life. The protagonist of the novel Som Bhaskar cuts his life with faithless, doubtful, rational, and possessive attitudes. He performs all his actions with attachment. He is a man tossed between rational personality of his father and unshakable faith in Krishna of his mother. To search the happiness, a materialistic happiness, he moves from one place to another, from Mumbai to Lal Haweli Benaras and finally to the mountains to grab the shares of Aftab Rai's company, from one woman to another. He seems entrapped with his strong sensuous desires to attain Bhautik Shukh in life. On the other hand there is Gargi who has been projected as an embodiment of faith in God. In her opinion, the life of those who run behind material happiness throughout their life is meaningless. She advises Som to start believing in God, to give up all his vanity, ahnkara. Gargi's character reflects human efforts to reach at the highest goal of the life and it is to know the Self. Som goes here and there in search of satisfaction, relief from restlessness but a little boy teaches how to be free from all panic of life. The panda, Vasudev teaches how to have faith in God. All characters of the story leads us towards the ultimate truth in one or other way. Everywhere in the story we find teachings of Bhagavad Gita, the real principles of life.

**Key Words**

Teachings of Bhagavad Gita, illusion, faith in God.

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Citation: Patel Vitthal. "Teachings of Bhagavad Gita in Arun Joshi's The Last Labyrinth", *Ganpat University Journal of Applied Research In Social Sciences & Humanities*, 1 (1), (2012): 124-133.

Arun Joshi (1939 – 1993) is an outstanding Indian English fiction writer who has outlined human struggle caused by inner crises of man living in the present world. As he has once said in one of his interviews with Sujatha Mathai, he seems influenced by western writers Camus and Sartre with existentialist arguments of the characters on one hand and Gandhiji and *Bhagavad Gita* with the reflection of teachings of *Bhagavad Gita* and Gandhian philosophy on the other. He is one of those Indian fiction writers who have effectively tried to reflect eternal metaphysics experienced by their protagonists. For example, in *The Foreigner* (1968) Joshi tells a story of Sindi Oberoy, the protagonist of the novel who is tossed between attachment and detachment, action and inaction. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) on the other hand, deals with Billy Biswas' delusion between primitive and civilized world. *The Apprentice* (1974) deals with the alienation of the protagonist Ratan Rathor from his pure self because of the crises of moral values, *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) deals with Som Bhaskar's confusion and his endless efforts to grab sensuous happiness. And *The City and The River* (1990) is Arun Joshi's fifth and the last work, which deals with the human predicament in the materialistic world and human thrust for salvation.

Through *The Last Labyrinth*, Joshi has attempted to reveal unexplored mysterious and dark realm of human soul confused with the labyrinth of illusions and unconquerable desires of sensuous pleasures. It is a labyrinth because everywhere, Som Bhaskar, the protagonist, hears 'I want. I want. I want.' But at the same time he is confused as to what he wants. He wants, but he does not know what he wants, and yet he wants. Som says, 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 (Joshi 48). O. P. Mathur has rightly pointed out that:

*The Last Labyrinth* also portrays the illusory world, which makes man "bewildered" as in the labyrinth in which the human soul is lost in the criss-crossing pathways of countless desires and sensuous pleasure (Mathur 33).

As opposed to the rational attitude of his father, who is wondering for causes behind causes, Som's mother is having unshakable faith in Lord Krishna as she believes that 'Krishna would cure her from cancer and flushes her capsules down the toilet' (Joshi 51). Som's attitude towards life is tossed between his father's rational search for 'causes of things, things that happen to men, to objects' (Joshi 20) and mother's extreme faith in Krishna, which keeps Som badly perplexed. Leela Sabnis, a Ph. D scholar from Michigan University and a professor of philosophy, with whom Bhaskar has an occasional sex, calls

him 'a neurotic, a compulsive fornicator'. (Joshi 72) This is a result of lacking well-defined vision of life and confidence in the rightness in one's own action.

The name of the protagonist in *The Last Labyrinth* itself suggests his dual nature; Som means moon, which suggests sensuous pleasure, and Bhaskar means sun, which suggest clear light of faith (Mathur 33). One of his remarks in the beginning of the story makes it clear that he was very much bound with desires for sensuous pleasure.

..... Beyond them all, audible only to my ear, a grey cry threshed the night air: I want. I want. I want. Through the light of my days and the blackness of my nights and the disquiet of those sleepless hours beside my wife, within reach of the tranquillisers, I had sung the same strident song: I want. I want. I want. I want (Joshi 9).

On the contrary, in one of his comments he confesses that he knows what he wants will not lead him towards Krishna means it is totally opposite to the true faith in God, which shows his want for faith lying at the deeper corner of his heart. He says:

And there were things that I had picked up by myself. I knew that money was dirt, a whore. So were houses, cars, carpets. I knew of Krishna, of the lines he had spoken: of Buddha at Sarnath, under the full moon of July, setting in motion the wheel of Righteousness.... (Joshi 9)

Arun Joshi has presented Som Bhaskar the human soul stuck within the labyrinth of life, in fact, a labyrinth of *Maya*; though he was millionaire, he has unending greed for money, though he was married with Gita, he has lust for female flesh. To search the happiness, a materialistic happiness, he moves from one place to another, from Mumbai to Lal Haweli in Benaras and finally to the mountains to grab the shares of Aftab Rai's company, from one woman to another, from Geeta to old Leela and finally to Anuradha with the strong desire to get her in his life. Struggle of Som Bhaskar throughout his life fingers at one of the preachings of Shri Krishna to Arjuna in the second chapter of *Bhagavad Gita*:

*matrasprshastu kaunteya shitoshnsukhadukhada*

मात्रास्पर्शस्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदा ॥ २-१४ ॥

O Kaunteya, contacts of the senses with their objects bring cold and heat (Gandhi 33). Som was passionately blind behind fornications with Leela and Anuradha, engrossed in *vishaya shukh*, he was entrapped in the snare of worldly life and pleasures; worldly temptations, and *moha* which made him turn blind eye to the reality. *Moha* refers to that which is opposed to knowledge. Som is married to a woman named Geeta and has fathered two children. Geeta loves Som much. He admits her trust and faith in him and his discontent towards her.

If discontent is my trademark, trust is Geeta's. She is an intelligent person, sophisticated, aware of the pitfalls of the world. ....

Geeta trusts like birds fly, like fish swim (Joshi 56)

In spite of loved much by Geeta, he wanders in search of love, as he feels his life is full of voids around. He seems frustrated by the life. He comes in contact with Leela Sabnis a psychology scholar, who he build an affair with and then later on with Anuradha, too. In som's opinion it was his effort to fill the voids as he argues;

It is the void of the world, more than its objects that bother me. The voids and the empty spaces, within and without. First, is was only the voids without: empty mountain sides, stretches of oceans, beaches, unsown fields, alleys after dark corridors of hospitals, the hum against the ear of a conch, cave (Joshi 42)

Here, Som looks cowardly, weak and frustrated like Arjuna in the beginning of the battle of Kurukshetra, torn between rationality and faith. He is obsessed with lust which was the reason for his frustration. He was not even able to sleep because of this obsession. He says that what of my obsession, then, obsession with woman (Joshi 66). Due to his frustration Som loses his temper with Geeta, Anuradha, Thapar, everyone around him. It reminds us the famous teaching of Krishna to Arjuna in the second chapter of *Bhagavad Gita*.

*dhyayato vishayan pumshah sangsteshupajayate  
sangatsamjayate kamah kamatkrodhabhijayate*

ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते ।  
सङ्गात्संजायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥२-६३॥

*krodhadbhavati smmohah sammohatsmritivibhramah  
smritivibhramshadbuddhinasho buddhinashatpranashyati*

क्रोधाद्भवति संमोहः संमोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः  
स्मृतिभ्रंशाद्बुद्धिनाशो बुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति ॥२-६३॥

Shri Krishna teaches Arjuna that the thought of possessing something will grow into a passionate desire to possess it, and it takes a hold of our mind. Anantanand Rambachan calls it "*kama*—the desires which result in pain and suffering to others. It also includes self-centered desires which makes one forgetful of the interest and need of others and which blind one to all". Attachment to the object produces impatience and passion gives rise to anger. When we fail to get the object of our desire, we become angry. As it recedes from us, we get angry with others. Anger clouds a man's vision, so that he loses his judgment and forgets what he is (Gandhi 61). To buy the shares of Aftab's company,

Som orders Mr. Thapar to do anything. Here, he seems weak in his judgment when he decides to mortgage lands and the plants to avail a loan which has never been mortgaged in the entire history of Bhaskar family (Joshi 138). He was stubborn to fulfill his desire of grabbing shares, at the same time he experiences panic from within. He was far from peace what he was in search of. The panic from within was out of control. As a result, he was afraid of his own surroundings. He says,

I was afraid the electricity would fail and I would be left hanging between two floors. It would not return for hours. The doors would be jammed and the air would be short of oxygen. Anything could then, happen (Joshi 140)

He was really hanged between two floors of his life, the rational and the spiritual. Som's efforts to fill the 'voids and the empty spaces, within and without' (Joshi 42) go in vain and he continues his search for satisfaction. He admits, 'What I needed, perhaps was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined' (Joshi 74). The unidentified sounds of the song 'I want, I want I want' (Joshi 70) endlessly hums in his ears and a man 'so successful, so intelligent, why should such a man so confused' (Joshi 72). Here lack of Som's intellect, understanding and decision making power is reflected. He seems not as clever as he thinks he is. Even Anuradha remarks:

'..... let me tell you something: you are not as clever as you think. You are wrong about many things. You are wrong even about yourself. You think you know a lot, when in fact you don't' (Joshi 55).

Here, the author points out at one of the verses of *Bhagavad Gita*

*nasti buddhiryuktsya na chayuktsya bhavana  
na chabhavayatah shantirshantsya krutah sukham*

नास्ति बुद्धिर्युक्तस्य न चायुक्तस्य भावना ।  
न चाभावयतः शान्तिरशान्तस्य कुतः सुखम् ॥२-६६॥

Those who have not won their senses, there can neither be Self-knowledge, nor Self-perception. No peace is possible without Self-perception, and without peace there can be no happiness. Mahatma Gandhi has translated the above verse where he says: "the undisciplined man has neither understanding nor devotion; for, for him who has no devotion there is no peace, and for him who has no peace whence happiness?" (Gandhi 63)

Lal Haweli, Aftab Rai, Anuradha, all symbolize the mystery, the labyrinth of *Maya*, the illusion, where Som Bhaskar is lost. Even Bhaskar himself was confused with existence and non-existence of Lal Haweli, with *sat* and *asat* of *Maya*. He makes a question to himself; 'Did Lal Haweli ever exist? Could it be a fragment of an overheated imagination,

a vapour, like that little cloud beyond my window, closing the face of midnight moon?' (Joshi 25) A little cloud of his imagination and illusions covered his true faith in Krishna, there created a wall between *gyey and gyata*. He is confused between existence and non-existence. He notices voids of caves and the voids of sky; the terrible vacancies of *lokalok*. (Joshi 42) Even on *Manikarnika Ghat*, he finds voids with a bang, both within and without. (Joshi 43) Illusion is like a river disappearing momentarily from view only to reappear in grand vista. (Joshi 26) The existing world around Som Bhaskar drags him in to the vortex of confusion and misery as he tries to embrace it. Som Baskar finds no escape from this world of illusion. Through the condition of Som Bhaskar in the story, Arun Joshi points out that all, human beings are subject to such illusion in one or other way. According to the concept of Maya, the very existence of an individual as a separate entity from true self is unreal, *asat*, in fact it is non-existence. In fact, this delusion is the starting point of Som Bhaskar's journey from *asat* to *sat*. Lord Krishna explains Arjuna in *Bhagavad Gita*

*na tvevham jatu nasm na tvn neme janadhipaha  
na chaiva na bhavishyamah sarve vayamatah param*

न त्वेवाहं जातु नासं न त्वं नेमे जनाधिपाः ।  
न चैव न भविष्यामः सर्वे वयमतः परम् ॥२-१२॥

There was never a time when these monarchs, you, or I did not exist; nor shall we ever cease to exist in the future. Dr. Radhakrishnan makes the meaning more clear by explaining that the reference in this verse is to "the pre-existence and post-existence of the empirical egos", he further says, "Each individual is an ascent from initial non-existence to the full existence as a real, from *asat* to *sat*" (Sarvepalli 103).

As Som Bhaskar was confused with the question of *Sat* or *Asat*, a psychiatrist throws another question to him, a question to know his real goal, which is the only source of peace in life. The higher goal of any individual is to know the true Self. A psychiatrist says;

'It is possible to conceive this world as being populated not with people of flesh and blood, with certain sexual orientations, but with souls. .... Of course, many might want the same thing. 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 the 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 towards a higher goal' (Joshi 67).

This remark reminds us one of the verses of the eighteenth chapter of *Bhagavad Gita*, where Arjuna says to Krishna that delusion is destroyed, he has gained Self-knowledge, his confusion with regard to body and Spirit is dispelled:

*nashto mohah smrutirldha tvtpsadanmayachyuta  
stitoasmi gatasandehah karishye vachanm tava  
yatra yogeshvarah krushno yatra partho dhanurdharah  
tatra shrirvij ayo bhutirdhr uva nitirma tirmam*

नष्टो मोहः स्मृतिर्लब्धा त्वत्प्रसादान्मयाच्युत ।  
स्थितोऽस्मि गतसन्देहः करिष्ये वचनं तव ॥१८-७३॥  
यत्र योगेश्वरः कृष्णो यत्र पार्थो धनुर्धरः ।  
तत्र श्रीर्विजयो भूतिर्धुवा नीतिर्मतिर्मम ॥१८-७८॥

The Last Labyrinth, thus, re-enacts with the modern context of some of the important teachings of *Bhagavad Gita*, the relevance of which is everlasting. In his commentary on the above verse, Mahatma Gandhi writes that "Shri Krishna has been given the epithet *Yogesh var* and Arjuna *Dhanurdhara*; this means that there are fortune, victory and eternal right only where there is perfect knowledge joined with light and power. Dhanurdhara means a person devoted to duty. He who has knowledge should have the fullest strength to use it; there should be perfection of knowledge and it should be fully translated into action, the action towards the higher goal."

Mr. Thapar presents the reports of the detectives about the shares of Aftab's company. The report says that 'they are lying with Krishna' (Joshi 157). He was surprised and says, 'What Krishna?' 'No less a man than Krishna is holding the shares of Aftab's company' (Joshi 157). And, he decides to go to the mountains to grab the blocked shares from Krishna. Som starts a new journey from here. He expresses his desire and says, 'I want to meet Krishna personally' (Joshi 159). This journey of Som seems to be intended to handle the part of shares of Aftab's company that Anuradha has offered to Krishna as a gift, but actually this is Som's journey to his realization of human values of love, faith and sacrifice. Arun Joshi's Som Bhaskar like the seers and saints of India turn towards mountains to realize and satisfy their craving self and attain spirituality ( Lokesh Kumar 104). The Lord helps such creature if only they run towards him. Som Bhaskar's career illustrates the supreme message of Gita (Mathur 35)

*sarvdharman parityajya mamekam sharanm vraj  
aham tvam sarvpapebhyo mokshayishyami ma shu chah*

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं ब्रज ।  
अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥१८-६६॥

Here, Lord Krishna asks Arjuna to give up all his arguments and take shelter. If he does so, Krishna promises him to release him from all his sins, the bonds of Karma. In the course of his journey, Som meets different people who help him go on in his journey

towards Krishna, the higher goal. He meets a little boy from Jaipur, who has come with his grandfather. The little boy teaches Som how to perform action without attachment, without restlessness. He teaches Som how to renounce the fruit of the action. The renunciation of fruits described in *Bhagavad Gita* is the acid test of faith (Gandhi 17). Next; he meets Vasudev, a *Panda*, who strengthens Som's faith towards Krishna. He says, 'fulfillment of wishes depends on faith.' He further says; 'Faith can move mountains, doctor sahib.' (Joshi 182). In the course of his journey towards the shrine, Som sees a long queue of lepers from all over the country waiting to be cured with the blessings of God. When they reach the shrine, amidst his surprise, he sees Gargi, who he never expected. They reached the shrine where identity of K is revealed when Som introduces K as Dr. Kashyap to Gargi. It suggests it was a journey from incomplete to complete with faith. Here, K narrates Som's critical situation at the time of severe heart attack, where there was no chance to save Som's life. K asks Gargi whether she has saved Som on Anuradha's request.

I am a medical doctor. I do not believe in things in which Anuradha believes. But I know for a fact that Som had no chance whatsoever and I want to know: did you save him? Anuradha says you did (LL, 190).

Gargi listens to K peacefully but seems to be reluctant to answer K's question. She took out a pad from under the mat and wrote out a few words. "I cannot tell you what you want to know" (Joshi 190). K asks her about the packet of shares of Aftab's company; ..... Anuradha left with you all her jewelry and a package of shares that this foolish man has been haunting for (Joshi 190). She accept that she is having that package but she passes a written message that; 'I don't know what it contains' (Joshi 190). When Gargi hands over that package to Som, he confesses that; "I can do without these shares if I find a reason to do so. I had bought them because I had a score to settle with Aftab and Anuradha. .... but after what K said yesterday, I have become confused. .... You must advise me what to do" (Joshi 196). Gargi replied that 'There is no harm in believing that God exists.' Gargi further says, 'we are all children trying to reach up to a crack in the door to peep in to a room' (Joshi 197).

The muteness of Gargi symbolizes understanding, the inner peace. Someone has rightly said; those who understood became mute. Here muteness is not due to physical deficiency but those, who are having perfect knowledge, finds no room for argument on any worldly action. It is meaningless for them. Gargi never speaks anything here, she only smiles. She smiles not because of joy or happiness; she smiles at the foolishness of the worldly creature. Her mind and intellect has become steady because she is not attached to anything, she remains same in every situation. Neither elated nor perturbed. Here again it reminds us what Lord Krishna points out to Arjuna:

*yah sarvtranbhisnehastattatprapya shubhashubham  
nabhinandati na dveshti tasya pragna pratishtitha*

यः सर्वत्रानभिस्नेहस्तत्प्राप्य शुभाशुभं ।  
नाभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥२-६७॥

Mahatma Gandhi makes the meaning implicit in his commentary on the above verse, as he says, "the man who has withdrawn interest from all objects, given up desires for them, who is unconcerned, indifferent in good or ill chance, who is neither please nor annoyed by anything – such a person's intellect is steadfast (Gandhi 54). Gargi is calm as her intellect becomes steady as she has withdrawn her senses completely from the sense objects, her senses are under her control. She has abandoned all her worldly desires, and has become free from longing and the feeling of 'I' and 'my'; as a result she has attained peace. According to Gandhiji, she has attained *Samadhi*, she is a symbol of true yogi who never feels 'I am doing this' (Gandhi 65). Her state is an example of the teaching of *Bhagavad Gita* where Lord Krishna teaches to Arjuna:

*tasmadyasya mahabaho nigruhitani sarvshah  
indriyanindriyarthebhyastasya pragna prtishthita*

तस्माद्यस्य महाबाहो निगृहीतानि सर्वशः  
इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेभ्यस्तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥२-६८॥

*vihaya kamanayah srvan pumanshcharati nihspruh  
nirmamo nirnkarah sa shantimadhigachchhti*

विहाय कामान्यः सर्वान् पुमांश्चरति निःस्पृहः ।  
निर्ममो निरहंकारः स शान्तिमधिगच्छति ॥२-७१॥

Thus, Arun Joshi presents in *The Last Labyrinth* feudal possessive conduct and human values ( Lokesh Kumar 108). Through *The Last Labyrinth*, Arun Joshi portrayed his experiences of faithless, doubtful, rational, and possessive attitude of an individual towards life in the form of Som Bhaskar. In this materialistic world, human being is confused of innumerable questions without answers. On the contrary there are people who have faith in God, the existence of real Self like Gargi and Som's mother who has flushed her capsules in the toilet because of the only belief that Krishna will cure it. The character of Gargi represents faith in God as she advises Som to give up all his vanity and take the shelter of God for inner peace. When she says, There is no harm in believing that God exists, we are all children trying to reach up to a crack in the door to peep in to a room', she passes a message of *Bhagavad Gita* to the rational and confused modern man, where Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to seek refuge in the Supreme Lord alone with loving devotion, by His grace he shall attain supreme peace and the Eternal Abode.

*tamev sharanm gachchh sarvbhaven bharata  
tatprasadatparam shantim sthanm prapsyasi shashvatam*

तमेव शरणं गच्छ सर्वभावेन भारत ।  
तत्प्रसादात्परां शान्तिं स्थानं प्राप्स्यसि शाश्वतम् ॥१८-६२॥

Arun Joshi deliberately puts teachings of *Bhagavad Gita* before the readers through ups and downs of the story of *The Last Labyrinth*. It talks about human values to be followed in order to attain peace from within. It talks about human predicament because of rational mind, about efforts to overcome worldly illusions, about actions and the attachments to the actions. It not only talks about problems or confusions of human beings but also shows remedy.

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