The Metaphysics and Metastructure of Appearance and Reality in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*

K.D. Verma, University of Pittsburgh

The Indian novelist Arun Joshi (b. 1939) has been following in the footsteps of philosophical novelists like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.[1] The moral problems of Rattan Rathor, the protagonist of *The Apprentice* (1974), are expanded and intensified in the figure of Som Bhaskar, the antihero of *The Last Labyrinth* (1981). Both characters confront the same problems of alienation and identity, with one significant difference: whereas Rattan Rathor 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 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."[2] This paper examines the dramatic conflict between the two intricate worlds of appearance and reality as portrayed in *The Last Labyrinth* as a basis of fictional discourse and as a structural principle of the narrative.

In many ways, Som Bhaskar is a Freudian figure whose discontent with his civilization and with himself, reiterated in the frequently repeated expression, "I want. I want. I want" (78), defines the structural principle of the narrative. Som Bhaskar has received a prestigious education at Harvard, has inherited the family business and fortune after his father's death, and has become a comfortable millionaire at the age of twenty-five. Apparently, Bhaskar is fully at home with the Western intellectual tradition, and one of the central issues in the process of his self-discovery is the role of Indian religious thought. Will Bhaskar's scientism help him to understand Krishna? The narrative of *The Last Labyrinth* seems to be a continuous dialectical confrontation between the main currents of Western intellectual thought and Indian religious thought, with one significant difference: Joshi's method of participating in the Western intellectual discourse is one of epistemological transvaluation. Considered in this context, *The Last Labyrinth* is essentially a document in the history of ideas. One may argue that it is probably inevitable that writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and Arun Joshi, to name only a few, would participate in the Western intellectual discourse. One could easily read in *The Last Labyrinth* the loose threads of Samuel Butler's argument between religion and science in *The Way of All Flesh*; and on the subjects of sex, love,

[1] In my discussion of Joshi's earlier work *The Apprentice*, I have pointed out the similarities between the narratives of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Apprentice*, especially the difficulty of fictional representations of life's larger issues and the interior quests pertaining to moral, psychological, and philosophical matters. See my essay "Alienation, Identity, and Structure in Arun Joshi's The Apprentice," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 22:1 (Jan. 1991) 71-90. An early version of this paper was read at the 1993 MLA Convention in Toronto.

[2] Arun Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1981) 11. All textual references noted in parenthesis are to this edition of the work.

and women, D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* bears a fairly plausible resemblance to Joshi's book.

In his discriminating self-analysis, Bhaskar outlines the issues boldly and clearly: "I knew that money was dirt, a whore. So were the 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; of Pascal, on whom I did a paper at Harvard: 'Let us weigh the gain and loss in wagering that God is, let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all, if you lose, you lose nothing.' All this I knew and much else. And yet, at the age of thirty-five I could do no better than produce the same rusty cry: I want. I want" (11-12). Bhaskar had inherited the business and wealth at twenty-five, but now he is thirty-five. It is interesting to note that during these ten years his perception of life has not changed and he seems, one would assume, to be getting closer to the idea of Krishna. He knew that the Pascalian thesis about the existence of God is distinctly different from Descartes's dualistic philosophy of matter and spirit. Leela Sabnis, a Ph.D. graduate from Michigan and a professor of philosophy, with whom Bhaskar has occasional sex, is a follower of Descartes. Sabnis explains somewhat assertively that in Descartes's philosophy the world of matter and the world of spirit are two separate worlds that cannot be united. Bhaskar is, of course, very quick to refer to the philosophy of Spinoza, according to whom "both matter and spirit embraced in God, and flowed from Him" (81). When Bhaskar undertakes the gruesome journey to the top of mountains to recover the shares of Aftab Rai's company, he meets Gargi, a mystic, who reminds Bhaskar that "there is no harm in believing that God exists" (213). And Bhaskar comments unreservedly and unintimidatedly: "So I was back with Pascal! . . . It is easier to believe that He does not exist" (213).

Historically, Pascal's polemical reply to Descartes's controversial philosophy rests on his theory of the wager or wagers, which is essentially epistemological. Indeed, the characterization of Leela Sabnis and her rejection of Bhaskar is allegorical of Pascal's rejection of Descartes's ideas. It is true that for an adequate understanding of Pascal one must know Descartes or possibly Montaigne or even St. Augustine, the intellectual milieu of Pascal, but the fact remains that Joshi takes the complex epistemological and ontological debate to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and further to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Significantly, the debate centers on the reading of Bhaskar, a modern intellectual who has been deeply immersed in all these ideas—he even wrote a paper on Pascal—but who cannot accept Pascal's wager. Yet the paradox is that Bhaskar keeps on thinking about Krishna: "No, there was nothing simple about this thing. There was nothing simple about Krishna. Had it been so, He would not have survived ten thousand years. He would have died along with the gods of the Pharaohs, the Sumerians, the Incas. Krishna was about as simple as the labyrinths of Aftab's Haveli" (173).

Bhaskar's father had also been searching for truth and the first cause. In a dialogue with Bhaskar, he says: "There was neither death nor immortality, then. . . . Who knows the truth? Who can tell whence and how arose the universe. The gods are later than its beginning: Who knows, therefore, whence comes this creation?" (155) Evidently, the argument about the first cause and about the Idea or Reality is ancient in origin, although modern scientific thought has not helped to bridge the

gap between science and religion. But Bhaskar's father reminded his son that in the metaphysics of the first cause and the Spirit scientific reasoning is of very little or no help. The best poetic reconciliation in the narrative comes from Anuradha: "Maybe Krishna begins where Darwin left off" (132). But does Anuradha comprehend the intellectual implications of such a condensed restatement of the long debate in the history of ideas—a sort of linear and direct unity and continuity between science and religion? Or is Joshi ironically suggesting the limits of science? In an answer to Aftab's question, Bhaskar states: "The point is that this Spirit is there. And if it is there, if Man has inherited it, then what is he to do with it?" (132) But he does not share Aftab's view that "it is a matter of visions." "Visions," remarks Bhaskar somewhat contemptuously, "are dime a dozen" (132).

It is abundantly clear from the narrative that Bhaskar has constantly subjected himself to rigorous and discursive self-analysis and at times this tyrannizing process has proved to be primitive, demoralizing, and self-destructive. On his way to the temple in the mountains, he calls himself a leper, the one who "needed a cure" (126). His insatiable hunger for Anuradha, Aftab's mistress, his compulsive fornications, his puzzling relationship with his wife Geeta, and his powerful desire to acquire control of Aftab's business only partially define his muddle. In fact, Leela Sabnis has frankly called him a fornicator and neurotic. But I believe that the serious conflict in the book is between the Cartesian world of reason and the world of intuition. Aftab Rai along with Anuradha, Gargi, and the dancing girls of Lal Haveli represent the mysterious world of intuition, of pain and pleasure and of balance and harmony. It is only in the context of the spiritual morality of Lal Haveli, including its labyrinths, that one can understand Anuradha's relationship with Aftab and Bhaskar, the pain of the history of Lal Haveli, and the impending takeover of Aftab's business by Bhaskar.

It is virtually impossible for Bhaskar to understand the undaunted morality and complexity of Anuradha's statements—she says that she is not unfaithful to Aftab and declares that "you can't marry everyone you love" (43)—and her sacrificial act of giving up her jewels and her shares in Aftab's company. Anuradha's conception of love belongs to the category of idealistic and spiritual love which implies the notions of goodness, sympathy, and sharing. Anuradha boldly emphasizes the obsolescence of the institution of marriage by disclosing somewhat laughingly that she has "never been married" (43), and later by commenting reflectively: "I can imagine I am married to Aftab. I can imagine I am married to you. My mother used to imagine she was married to Krishna" (128).

In contrast, Leela Sabnis's relationship with Bhaskar is very short-lived. She believes that the sexual act is concerned only with the body, the world of matter. Her ideologies of free love and feminism, it should be noted, are distinctly different from Anuradha's ideas of love and sexuality. Anuradha's incorruptible notion of love corresponds to the idea of love as *bhakti* (selfless devotion), a kind of love that is commonly understood in terms of the mythical legend of Krishna and his cohorts. The tragedy and the paradox are that Som Bhaskar and Leela Sabnis belong to the same materialistic world of empiricism, rationalism, and intellectualism. Bhaskar is convinced that in Leela Sabnis's rational world "Descartes and *tantras* [do] not mix" (54). Although Leela Sabnis urges Bhaskar to understand and accept the Cartesian thesis, Bhaskar seems to believe firmly that "what [he]

needed, perhaps, was something, somebody, somewhere in which the two worlds combined" (82).

In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche divides the history of ideas into three centuries: (1) "Aristocratism," the era of Cartesian reason and will; (2) "Feminism," the age of superiority and supremacy of feeling, as advanced by Rousseau; and (3) "Animalism," the era of Schopenhauerian will and therefore "the sovereignty of animality."[3] "The nineteenth century," adds Nietzsche, "is more animalic and subterranean, uglier, more realistic and vulgar, and precisely for that reason 'better,' 'more honest' . . . but sad and full of dark cravings, but fatalistic" (*WP* 59). Considering that the twentieth century is only a logical extension of the nineteenth century, we find that a work like *The Last Labyrinth* and the figure of Som Bhaskar belong to Nietzsche's third category. Som Bhaskar is honest and truthful about matters pertaining to his libidinousness and other desires and the ensuing moral and psychological problems. His life is blighted by an embarrassing and debasing vulgarity and an irrecoverable sense of vanity and urge for power. The more Bhaskar craves the gratification of his desires to gain control over Aftab's company and complete possession of Anuradha, the more excruciating and uglier the situation becomes. But Som Bhaskar can find neither the truth nor the remedy for his suffering, since he has combined sex with power, money, and authority.

Bhaskar is no doubt familiar with Pascal's philosophical formulation of the relationship between moral conscience and the ability to comprehend truth, but his ravenous pursuit of the world of desire has destroyed his reasoning power. Evidently, the matter of ascertaining moral conscience has been expediently obviated, for the convoluted structure of reality in which Bhaskar's paraxeological values are defined, has no reference to such terms as conscience or moral conscience. Money, wife, and children, successful business and prestigious education have given Som Bhaskar neither freedom nor happiness. The more he runs after Anuradha, the more he finds out the futility of the situation. After all, the central metaphor of Lal Haveli suggests an indecipherable and invincible illusion in which Bhaskar is caught as a helpless prisoner of Aftab's business and Anuradha's sexuality. Earlier, Bhaskar was a prisoner of the Cartesian voids, the vacant spaces in nature and hence his own mind. And paradoxically, his business of manufacturing plastic pails is a monster that will devour his own creative energies.

It may be argued that in a moralistic discourse the most gruesome situation in the structure of civilization represented by the narrative is Bhaskar's marriage to Geeta. Bhaskar, considering his own embarrassing deviations, frankly recognizes that Geeta too has every right to "the adulteries of the body," though she has "only taken to cleansing of the soul" (63). In accepting her position as the insignificant other and resigning herself to her husband's Don Juanish affairs with other women, Geeta has patronized Bhaskar's lustful indulgences, recognizing at the same time her own pathetic helplessness and self-deprecation. She has known about her husband's affair with Anuradha; in fact, during her husband's illness, Geeta and Anuradha had jointly prayed for his recovery. While Geeta suffers her

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (1967. New York: Vintage, 1968) 58-59. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation WP.

husband's womanizing and boozing, Anuradha gets the upper hand in dealing with Aftab and Bhaskar. Although Gargi has called Anuradha Bhaskar's Shakti, Bhaskar rightly calls her his "dark and terrible love" (157), more in the sense of the Freudian id. Ironically, the tantric metaphor of Shakti for Anuradha remains incomplete, even dysfunctional. It is of course true that Anuradha electrifies, vivifies, and controls Bhaskar's life, thus enabling Bhaskar to know his subconscious self.[4] But as Eros she does not lead Bhaskar to the recognition of Krishna in himself.

Bhaskar's unconquerable desire for Anuradha and Anuradha's own sexuality are paradigmatic much more in the Freudian sense and the Jungian sense of the anima than in the Indian sense of the Shakti.[5] The mythical-poetical world of Lal Haveli, with its mysterious voids and labyrinths, remains illusory to the scientific-rational mind of Bhaskar, but it is undoubtedly Anuradha who, with her evocative physicality and sexuality, is the principal creator of illusion. One would surmise that Bhaskar's complete and perfect union with Anuradha could give him spiritual wholeness, the state in which sexual anxiety and spiritual consciousness are fully integrated. But in this complex psychoanalytical-theological argument, Anuradha remains merely Bhaskar's projection. As Bhaskar acknowledges somewhat helplessly: "There was more to her than met the eye. A world spinning all by itself. I was infatuated with this mysterious world" (189). Bhaskar, as is clear from the thrust of the narrative, cannot reconcile the worlds of ego and id. It must not be forgotten that Bhaskar's inexorable use of power to possess Aftab's business and Anuradha's person simply adds to her inextricability. There is an obvious analogy between the two phases of the book: the first phase when Bhaskar simply tries to take over Aftab's business, and the second phase when Anuradha as the personification of Bhaskar's desire becomes the creator of illusion, the veil of Maya in the Schopenhauerian sense.[6] Imprisoned in this world of Maya, Bhaskar has totally lost the focus and perspicacity of his own vision and will. While Bhaskar's own ego lets him believe that he can conquer the world around him, his unethical and unjust conduct of repressive dominance and authoritarian tyranny clearly show the nature of degeneration in him.

In his introduction to Pascal's *Pensées*, T.S. Eliot makes the following observation: "But I can think of no Christian writer, not Newman even, more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through the satisfaction of the whole being."[7] But Nietszche in his shrewd observation has compared Pascal and Schopenhauer: "'*Our inability to know the truth* is the consequence of our corruption, our moral decay'; thus Pascal. And thus, at bottom, Schopenhauer. 'The deeper the corruption of reason, the more necessary the doctrine of salvation'"

---

[4] See Arun Joshi's own remarks cited by R.K. Dhawan in *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, n.d.) 46.

[5] For the idea of Shakti in Indian thought see my essay "The Woman Figure in Blake and the Idea of Shakti in Indian Thought," *Comparative Literature Studies* 27:3 (1990) 193-210.

[6] See Thomas Mann, "Schopenhauer," in his *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (1947; New York: Knopf, 1968) 388ff.

[7] T.S. Eliot, Introduction, *Pascal's Pensées* (New York: Dutton, 1958) xix. Also see some very enlightening essays and Harold Bloom's Introduction in *Blaise Pascal*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989).

(*WP* 52). I must also refer to Thomas Mann's famous essay in which he compares Schopenhauer with Freud. Freud's world of Id, as Mann explains, is very much identical with Schopenhauer's world as Will.[8] Som Bhaskar's world, whether Freudian or Schopenhauerian or Pascalian, is a study of mental, moral, and emotional disorder, resulting from man's inability to know the world of Id or the world as Will. The knowledge of Krishna or truth presupposes complete harmony of all discordant and hidden forces and the complete annihilation of the ego. Bhaskar cannot know Krishna because spiritual knowledge is an intuitive recognition of the worlds of flesh and intellect, matter and spirit. Bhaskar's thinking is still divisive, fragmented, because he continues to seek logicality in the power of his uncontrollable desire and in the existence of the Spirit. The ironic difference between his mental and moral development is evident in his inability to read poetic mythology and symbolism in which Krishna and Shiva are symbolic centers of truth and consciousness.

In his scientific and rational thinking Bhaskar can only interpret the third eye of Shiva as the third eye of the lizard Hatteria and Krishna only as a gas flame. It is only when the world of flesh, spirit, and intellect are unified that sexuality, eroticism, and pleasure approximate the condition of truth. Pleasure considered in relation to itself or to any kind of power or power-wielding characteristics is merely a form of indulgent sensuality. The worst type of vulgarity from which Bhaskar suffers is his senseless pride of wealth and intellectual superiority, which obstructs his mind and heart from envisioning reality. His unbridled sensuality and invidious pride lead him only to despair and meaninglessness in life, and hence to the impulsive decision to commit suicide. Although it had become clear to him that "Leela Sabnis was a muddled creature. As muddled as me" (77) and that "like Aftab [he], too, had wanted to start life all over again" (169), he is unable to forge ahead.

With the disintegration of Bhaskar's dream world, the narrative crumbles. Quite surprisingly, the narrative does not include any plans for the recovery and redemption of Som Bhaskar. One cannot help observing that in the conceptual framework of a poetic tragedy people like Som Bhaskar, Geeta, and Leela Sabnis are ineffective players. Nevertheless, Anuradha's sudden and unceremonial disappearance from the narrative, Geeta's dehumanized existence, and Leela Sabnis's emaciated rationalism are a commentary on the vitiated social order of which Som Bhaskar is a tragic product. Bhaskar's lust for Anuradha has not changed into love, nor has his repugnant and vituperative attitude toward Aftab mellowed. Bhaskar's anxiety, fear, and pain, stemming from his own mental and emotional fragmentation, are clearly echoed in these lines: "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 doubting. Of this dark earth and these empty heavens" (223).

Evidently, here one finds an element of the Kierkegaardian epistemology of experiencing truth and of expostulating that there is perhaps a greater power, even though the intermediary of this power is supposed to be Anuradha. Unable to comprehend the structure of reality, especially the matters of unity and continuity

[8] Thomas Mann, "Freud and the Future," *Essays of Three Decades* 415ff.

and also of certitude, penetrability, and permanence, Bhaskar's clogged mind struggles with the problem of the limits of knowledge. Bhaskar has now finally come to realize that the gap between the self and reality cannot be closed. Bhaskar's self has been lost to the overabundance of fear and pain. Strangely, however, Bhaskar continues to wonder about the validity and meaning of these "strange mad thoughts": "Are they the harbingers, the pilot-escort, of melancholia? Of insanity? Of Faith?" (223) Of course, Bhaskar has not forgotten that his father had died of melancholia. Foucault points out that melancholia, variously considered from the sixteenth century to Descartes to modern times, is a form of disorder or madness.[9] Nevertheless, melancholia and insanity belong to the realm of unreason or non-reason—as perhaps does faith. But it remains to be argued if Bhaskar can recover from delirious madness and self-debilitating anxiety and fear.

[9] See Michael Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Random House, 1965), especially 117ff.