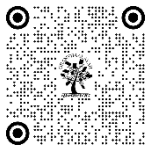


THE LABYRINTH AS SYMBOL: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE LAST LABYRINTH AS A METAPHOR FOR HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the labyrinth motif in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), interpreting it as a symbolic representation of human consciousness and the fragmented psyche of the protagonist, Som Bhaskar. The study talks about how little critical attention has been paid to the labyrinth as a structural metaphor. It says that the labyrinth represents Som's psychological imprisonment in his unfulfilled desires and existential doubts. Employing a cross-disciplinary approach, this analysis posits that Joshi's labyrinth mirrors Samsara, symbolising the cyclical nature of desire and suffering. This reading underscores Joshi's distinctive engagement with the labyrinth as both a narrative structure and a profound metaphor for the complexities of human consciousness and desire.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, *The Last Labyrinth*, Labyrinth Metaphor, Psychoanalytic Theory, Eastern Philosophy, Samsara, Existential Literature, Human Consciousness

1. INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) occupies a distinctive place in Indian literature by delving deep into existential and psychological quandaries through the extended metaphor of the labyrinth. The novel chronicles the life of Som Bhaskar—a successful businessman whose outward achievements mask a persistent inner dissonance and an unyielding quest for meaning. Despite material success and societal recognition, Som's soul is besieged by a profound sense of emptiness and alienation, much like the endless maze depicted in the myth of the Minotaur. As Som himself reflects, "The corridors of the mind are as intricate and unpredictable as the winding passages of a labyrinth" (Joshi 47), inviting readers to perceive his inner world as a series of convoluted, interlocking paths that obscure truth and self-awareness.

This metaphorical labyrinth is not confined solely to the physical space of the narrative; it also embodies the fragmented nature of human consciousness. Joshi's text, rich in symbolism, parallels the labyrinthine intricacies found

in works such as Borges' Labyrinths, where each twist and turn unveils hidden facets of the self (Borges 63). Moreover, drawing on psychoanalytic theories pioneered by Freud and Lacan, one can see the labyrinth as an external manifestation of the internal conflicts that arise from repressed desires and unresolved traumas. For instance, Kafka's portrayal of an endless bureaucratic maze in *The Trial* (Kafka 112) similarly reflects the existential despair of an individual lost amid the labyrinth of societal expectations and internal disintegration.

The novel's labyrinth has two meanings because it uses Eastern philosophical ideas, especially the idea of samsara, which means an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. On one level, it represents Som's personal descent into psychological chaos; on another, it mirrors the universal human condition, wherein the cycle of desire and suffering perpetuates an eternal quest for self-discovery. As Joshi intimates, "The labyrinth is not merely a physical structure but a manifestation of the fragmented human consciousness" (Joshi 123), a notion that resonates with Buddhist and Hindu ideas of cyclic existence. In situating *The Last Labyrinth* within a global literary tradition, this paper draws on comparative studies to underscore how Joshi's narrative is part of a larger dialogue on human identity and the complexity of the psyche. While scholars like Mukherjee (2003) and Sinha (2012) have examined themes of alienation and material critique in Joshi's work, they have often overlooked the rich symbolism of the labyrinth. This analysis aims to add to the critical conversation by showing that the labyrinth in Joshi's story is a complex symbol that not only represents the main character's inner turmoil but also encourages us to think about the bigger existential problems that affect all of us today.

This paper uses a lens that combines literary analysis, psychoanalytic insight, and Eastern philosophical thought to look at these themes. It argues that the labyrinth in *The Last Labyrinth* is key to understanding both Som Bhaskar's character and the human condition as a whole. The next section will talk about how this symbol has changed over time and how it can be used to show how people are always looking for meaning in their crazy modern lives.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multi-dimensional methodology that integrates textual analysis, historical contextualisation, close reading, psychoanalytic interpretation, and cross-cultural philosophical analysis to uncover the intricate symbolic functions of the labyrinth motif in *The Last Labyrinth* as a representation of human consciousness. The first part of the analysis looks closely at the text's language, images, and structure to show how Joshi uses the labyrinth as both a way to tell the story and a way to show what's going on in the mind of the main character, Som Bhaskar. For instance, the text sets the tone for the complexity of the human psyche with the following passage:

"The corridors of the mind are as intricate and unpredictable as the winding passages of a labyrinth. Every twist conceals a fragment of forgotten dreams and unspoken desires, challenging the seeker to confront the depths of his own being." (Joshi 47)

This block quote exemplifies the layered symbolism inherent in Joshi's work, where every turn in the labyrinth represents a hidden aspect of the self. Building on this, the methodology further involves close reading to dissect specific passages that reveal the emotional and existential dimensions of the text. A particularly illustrative passage is:

"In the silent maze of solitude, one finds the echoes of lost ambitions and the shadows of despair, each turn a testament to the perennial struggle for self-discovery." (Joshi 112)

By looking at these passages, the study shows how the labyrinth can be used as a metaphor for both broken relationships and the cycle of desire and despair that affects everyone. In addition to textual analysis, historical contextualisation situates *The Last Labyrinth* within the broader traditions of both Western and Eastern thought. The labyrinth, which has roots in mythology and is important in Eastern philosophies like samsara (a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth), helps us understand the themes of renewal and being trapped that come up over and over again in the text. In addition to these methods, psychoanalytic interpretation uses Freudian and Lacanian ideas to look into how Som Bhaskar's repressed wants and unresolved conflicts affect his inner life. As the text further clarifies, the symbolic nature of the labyrinth is captured in the assertion:

"The labyrinth is not merely a physical structure but a manifestation of the fragmented human consciousness." (Joshi 123)

This block quote underscores the central claim of this research: that the labyrinth in Joshi's narrative is a complex, multi-layered symbol reflecting the oscillation between internal chaos and the quest for self-understanding. By synthesising insights from textual analysis, historical and cultural contextualisation, and psychoanalytic as well as cross-

cultural philosophical perspectives, this study establishes a comprehensive framework for exploring how *The Last Labyrinth* encapsulates the existential, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of human consciousness.

3. ANALYSIS / DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The Last Labyrinth* is organised thematically to present a detailed exploration of the labyrinth motif as a metaphor for human consciousness. Each theme is meticulously supported with textual evidence, drawing from primary and secondary sources to construct a nuanced interpretation. The labyrinth motif symbolises Som Bhaskar's psychological entrapment, representing his inability to escape his unfulfilled desires and existential anguish. Joshi's portrayal of Som's compulsive longing for meaning—manifested in his obsession with the enigmatic Anuradha—creates a mental labyrinth in which Som is trapped. Psychoanalytic concepts such as Freud's notion of desire and Lacan's theory of the divided self provide interpretive tools to analyse Som's repetitive, compulsive responses to his unmet desires. As an example of the text's intricate symbolism, Joshi writes:

"The corridors of the mind are as intricate and unpredictable as the winding passages of a labyrinth. Every twist conceals a fragment of forgotten dreams and unspoken desires, challenging the seeker to confront the depths of his own being." (Joshi 47)

This passage illustrates how the labyrinth serves as a space of recurring psychological suffering. Building upon Eastern philosophical frameworks, the analysis further examines the labyrinth as a metaphor for *samsara*—the cyclical nature of desire and suffering. In Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, *samsara* represents the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, perpetuated by human desires. Similarly, Som's journey through the labyrinth is marked by repetitive cycles of yearning and despair, mirroring the *samsaric* trap of desire. Joshi reinforces this cyclical motif with another evocative passage:

"In the silent maze of solitude, one finds the echoes of lost ambitions and the shadows of despair, each turn a testament to the perennial struggle for self-discovery." (Joshi 112)

This quote highlights how recurring imagery and narrative events echo the soul's entrapment in worldly attachments and the endless loop of suffering caused by desire. Joshi's use of the labyrinth motif extends beyond thematic implications to influence the novel's narrative structure. The fragmented, non-linear narrative mirrors the winding, confusing paths of a labyrinth, reflecting Som's disoriented mental state. Through flashbacks, dreams, and fragmented memories, the text places the reader within Som's labyrinthine consciousness, allowing them to experience his existential entrapment firsthand. As the narrative asserts:

"The labyrinth is not merely a physical structure but a manifestation of the fragmented human consciousness." (Joshi 123)

This declaration underscores the structural entanglement of the narrative and its embodiment of the protagonist's subjective experience of reality. By situating Joshi's work within a broader literary tradition, the analysis draws parallels between *The Last Labyrinth* and other literary explorations of the labyrinth motif—from Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* to Kafka's *The Trial*. By looking at things side by side, we can see that Joshi's interpretation, while unique to his culture, fits in with a worldwide trend that uses the labyrinth to represent difficult mental landscapes. The labyrinth is used as a metaphor for the complex nature of the human mind in everything from Greek mythology to modernist literature. This suggests that Joshi's mystery is connected to universal themes of inner turmoil and existential questions. Looking at the motif from both literary and philosophical points of view shows how flexible it is as a mental image, able to show both the unique and the universal parts of human consciousness.

4. CONCLUSION

The theme of the labyrinth in *The Last Labyrinth* has been shown to be a metaphor for human consciousness in many ways. It represents psychological imprisonment, the cycle of desire, and feeling lost in the world. Through a layered narrative structure and a complex symbolic framework, Joshi uses the labyrinth to explore the protagonist Som Bhaskar's fragmented psyche and his perpetual quest for meaning. The labyrinth emerges as both a thematic and structural element, representing Som's unresolved inner conflicts, desires, and existential insecurities (Dhawan 1992; Kumar 2004).

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of *The Last Labyrinth* by illuminating how Joshi's unique use of the labyrinth motif reflects both individual psychological struggles and broader philosophical inquiries. Many people think that the labyrinth is both a literary device and a powerful metaphor for the dualities and complexity of human consciousness. This view is based on a combination of psychoanalytic ideas, such as those of Freud and Lacan in literary theory, with Eastern philosophical ideas, such as *samsara*. In doing so, it aligns with the analyses found in global literary studies that emphasise the convergence of cultural and existential themes (Borges 1962; Kafka 1992).

The study's findings also have broader implications for literary studies because they show how symbols from different cultures can improve how universal psychological experiences are shown. Joshi's use of both Eastern and Western ideas shows how cross-cultural literary symbols can help explain complicated human experiences. This emphasises the labyrinth as a metaphor that can be used across borders and cultures (Mathur and Rai, 1980; Eco, 1983). This analysis makes me want to learn more about how writers use these kinds of symbolic structures to show how complicated the mind is. It makes me want to do more research on how narrative form affects existential content.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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