

Identity Crisis in Arun Joshi's novel *The City and the River*

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's last novel *The City and the River*. It came out some ten years after 'The Last Labyrinth', a considerable span of time if one takes into consideration that the novelist took only a little more than a decade to publish his other four novels, a collection of short stories and a book illustrating the history of the philanthropic institution he worked for. The story told here is that after a disturbing dream, interpreted as a harbinger of problems by the Astrologer, the Great Master of the City resolves to strengthen his authority. Surrounding himself with a group of ambitious, sycophant ministers, he tries to win the boatmen's sympathies. They represent the other pole in the city, the poor who still live according to tradition and have made an alliance with the river.

Arun Joshi's the fifth and the final novel, *The City and the River* was published in 1990 after a breach of nine years. It aims at determining resolution to the inveterate problems of man's birth and death. The novel runs concurrently on two levels, physical and metaphysical. There is a deep inner meaning and exact purpose behind the conception of some of the eccentric characters. Joshi while dealing with the intricacy of the modern society makes an effort to expose the plots of the modern-day politicians. He explores deep into the mind of the common man to substantiate his old age attachments with nature that makes him refuse to concede the supremacy of the so called, self-appointed, Grand Masters of the society.

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* is a fable about the Indian nationstate. It is different from his other novels insofar as it is an openly political allegory and satire and focuses on the situation and search not of an individual but of the whole country. Mixing of fantasy and prophecy, this is a parable of the centuries-old battle between the victim citizens and corruptleaders.

The novel starts at the end of the story. The Prologue portrays an old wise old Great Yogeshwara sending his young disciple named The Nameless One to the great City as his teacher. Yogeshwara tells the story of the great City to The Nameless One. The great City on the shores of the great River is ruled by a tyrannic Grand Master. He lives in a white-domed palace on the quaint Seven Hills. Up on these hills stand the sumptuous houses and offices of the interested ruling elite. Then there are the docile brickpeople who live in brick settlements. The most despised of all are the muddy ones. The most rebel are the boatmen who bow before the river and refuse to greet the Grand Master.

Meanwhile, time is approaching for the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy about the city. He Said a new king would stand up to reign over the city. The conflict between the leadership and the reigned ridges. The Grand Master and his Astrologer announce the draconian Triple Laws, - one, all citizens must give full allegiance to the Grand Master; second, to ensure prosperity for all, there will be only one child to a mother; third, who disobey the Grand Master will be ruthlessly punished. The dreaded Age of Supreme Greatness is declared. Law enforcement is used to intimidate the masses. The Council of the Grand Master is filled with powerful sycophants. On the other hand are the revolutionary leaders - Bhumi Putra alias Bhoma the young iconoclast teacher of the boatmen, the Professor, the wise old Hermit of the Mountain, and their disciples and comrades. Bhoma is declared an enemy of the city and the leaders chase him ruthlessly. In the midst of these increasing tensions lies the fierce confrontation between the hi-tech culture of the Grand Master and the natural paths of the boat-people. The Grand Master is now confronted with opposition not only from

the poor but also from the middle class so far docile. The resilience of the middle class is represented by – Dharma the police officer, Dharma's Grandfather, Dharma's fiancée Shailaja, Shailaja's brother-the mystical revolutionary and Vasu the brave journalist.

After the meeting with his adversaries, the uncertainties of the Grand Master increased. Blinded by ambition and arrogance, stupidly foresees a complete takeover of the city on the day of the Feast of the river. The astonished crowds are terrorized by giving him allegiance. The palace Astrologer anointed the son of the Grand Master as the heir of his father. The state rages ferociously against the rebels. There is resistance on the part of poor and the middleclass, citizens, especially in the form of non-violent civil disobedience. As the tyranny of government comes to a head, freedom of expression disappears. The Professor, representative of the intellectual class, thinks of another way to disseminate the truth about the state and the rebel leader Master Bhoma. His initiative entitled 'The Lottery Stall' is backed by altruistic and intrepid citizens. The ingenious Lottery Stall company is smashed, but Bhoma's parable is recounted among millions and the ruling class is ridiculed. The Grand Master now applies a 'trolling nett' - a group of self-multiplying laws suggesting unlimited tyranny. Brutality runs rampant on commoners.

Finally, when the broken boatmen accept the oath of loyalty to the Grand Master, Master Bhoma goes back to their rescue. He teaches the boatmen about the transience of despots and exhorts them to overcome their fear of the Grand Master. The last stage of the people's uprising began in the Gold Mines, the vast underground prisons. The Head of the Boatmen, the Professor and thousands of rebels are imprisoned here. The people are appalled that the Head of the Boatmen is blinded and the Professor dies fasting for justice. Despite the inevitable functioning of fate, each individual has a 'choice'. Whilst the rebels choose to fight for the Truth, the Grand Master, in spite of repeated admonitions, chooses to become more arrogant. A new Supreme Council is secretly created. It crowned the Grand Master as King and the City became an absolute dynastic dictatorship

of the elite. All democratic practices are eliminated.

The Hermit of the Mountain realizes that the end of the City is near. Endless rain descend from the skies and the waters of the River ascend. The boatmen alone face the omnipotent state. Their arcs and arrows are not compatible with armoured tanks and laser pistols. Their burning bodies are thrust into the River. On the other hand, the leaders step over the City to celebrate the coronation of the Grand Master as King. The King's Son kills Master Bhoma and his confessors. The last defence of the boatmen goes down. The Hermit anoints the child of the first boatman assassinated by the King as the next Hermit. A raft rises from the River and transports the child and the City's horoscope to the abode of Yogeshwara in the mountains. The River floods the City. The Seven Hills crumble. The King and his family perish weeping in terror. It rains for seven days and seven nights and the city disappears. On the eighth day, the sun rises over a boundless ocean. Divine justice is meted out.

Thus, the Great Yogeshwara recounts the moving tale of the city and the River to his disciple - the Nameless One. The Nameless One is none other than the child of the boatmen who had been anointed as the new Hermit of the Mountain prior to the fall of the city. A child of the poorest, he is divinely ordained to bring humanity to enlightenment. A new City with a new Grand Master came into existence. The new Hermit must preach to this new City, where, as before, the rulers confront the governed. It is always hoped that the Grand Masters will repent, that the city will cleanse itself of its vices by sacrifices. The novel concludes with Yogeshwara urging the new Hermit to pursue his efforts for the victory of good over evil.

This is the affirmation of the poor in rejecting the rule of the usurpers. The issue is equal rights and equal distribution of wealth. *The City and the River* is the outcome of an effort by the writer to confront himself and society. It reflects the emotions and aspirations of ordinary people. We can also look at it as a political novel. In antique India it was a standard practice among Kings and Emperors to send their sons into ashrams, little hamlets,

into the deep forests of saints and wise men who knew all the branches of knowledge well. The Prologue of *The City and the River* introduces a Guru and a Shishya a teacher and a disciple, situated somewhere near the Himalayas. The teacher is the tall, well-built, long grey and bearded hair, the Great Yogeshwara, and the taught is the Nameless-One. He was thought both invaluable and little value, ideas of the ancestors in an ancient language which nobody understood. He is advised to keep the ideas separate, such as grain and chaff, to avoid any harm. The only thing he hadn't learned over the last thirty years was his identity.

The City and the River is an allegory of the current world. How the budding and the undersized, third world countries spend more money on buying arms and the armaments, instead of focussing on eliminating poverty, can be easily understood from the Commissioner's words and argument. Even in twenty first century, one finds many rules in different countries executing, gratuitously, armed solutions for ordinary common-man struggles. Perhaps it is easy for them to destroy the poor instead of poverty.

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* not only offers a striking glimpse of the past, present and likely future of the modern Indian nation-state, but also suggests a mature vision for personal and national redemption. It is basically a satire on the National Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi government in India during 1975-1977, when democracy was briefly suspended. Though littered with references to this historical event, it goes beyond the particular to a universal perspective as the novelist philosophically interprets the destinies of the Indian state and its citizens. The novel offers a complete microcosm of India where corruption has eroded the government machinery and the rich and the mighty dominate public life. It dissects almost every aspect of national life from economy and education to media, prisons and security forces. Most institutions are shown to be insensitive to commoners and monopolized by politicians and capitalists. However, amid class-divides, tyranny and a hi-tech materialistic culture, the good and the bad, the idealistic and the unprincipled co-exist in every arena. If there is ruthless power-politics,

there are also forces of resistance which fight for democracy and justice.

The City and The River distinguished by their spiritual vision of political art. From the prologue that proposes essential for leaders, to the distorted psyche of the rulers, the constant glare of the state over private life, the dead-hearted government officials, and the various responses of the masses to despotism, there is a central theme in the novel – spirituality as opposed to materialism. The novelist castigates a nation which has changed its priorities and forgotten its rich patrimony and noble ethic, where the righteous are ostracized and punished, where the narrow minded middle-classes do not oppose the evil-doers, where greed has possessed people and the state expects its agents to become inhumane.

Arun Joshi also argues a vital role for citizens and civil society in resisting tyranny and creating a brighter domestic future. It condemns those who are silent onlookers. Only a courageous, disinterested and just action can liberate citizens and defeat the despots. In this context, the novel also addresses the conflict between violent and non-violent methods of resistance. It refers to the futility of non-violent resistance in the modern nation-state which commands bottomless resources and heartless men. At the same time, the novelist has doubts that violence is an enduring solution.

As *The City and the river* is the last novel of the master's craftman, his farewell communication implies that the old order must yield to a new beginning. The novel is a suggestion at the supremacy of nature over man's short span, which reminds Tennyson's perennial Brook that keeps singing, "Men may come and men may go, but I go on forever". The novel, *The City and the River* reflects Arun Joshi's newer path in satire and allegory. As R.K. Dhawan remarks it, "is evidence of Joshi's 'road not taken', for in this work he turns his focus from the private to the public. And in this, he is following the contemporary vogue of writing a political novel with a theme that holds good for all times. The novelist fails in characterisation, characters do not develop spontaneously. They lack psychological

depths. Arun Joshi leaves them as prototype than developing them into individual characters.

The conflicts between alienated self and the socio-cultural forces are the suggestions of Arun Joshi's fictional creations. In all the novels, the protagonists of his novels are exposed to extreme social, cultural and psychological pressures. This search of identity is the central idea of Arun Joshi's novels. The estrangements that emerge in the novels of Arun Joshi are because of the fight between the socio-cultural and psychological anxieties. The alienation arises because of the social maladjustment and poignant insecurity, this alienated self leads to an emotional revolt within the self that every moment of life is in hunt of identity.

Arun Joshi's novels present a world where man is confirmed by the self and the questions of his existence. Instead of projecting the material agents, he focuses on the depiction of the interior of individual psyche, the outer journey leading to inner depths of mind. In his novels, he depicts the protagonist's mental conflicts, torments and estrangements and finally their solving of problems and acquiring selfhood. With the theme of projecting the characters, with their ambitions, needs, dreams, failures, disappointments, withdrawals, detachment and alienation, Arun Joshi has added a new dimension and hope to the Indo-English literature.

All his novels have isolated brilliance but in total they glow with deeper perspective. They show both stability and development. Arun Joshi suggests a amalgamation of tradition and modern culture which will be favourable to the development and progress of both the individual and the society. Each and every novel of Joshi ends with an positive note and all the protagonists are reborn into another crack of dawn of self-awareness and self-realization.

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