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**ARUN JOSHI'S NOVEL 'THE CITY AND THE RIVER': A QUEST FOR SURVIVAL**

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**Abstract**

Arun Joshi, a major contemporary Indian English novelist, has depicted powerfully the existential dilemma of the modern man evoking our cultural heritage and imperishable moral values. Through his writings, Joshi tries to reveal the restless individual psyche of the Protagonist, urged by an instinctive desire to determine his identity in relation to himself, to his society and also to humanity at large. It is a matter of regret that he died too early, when he was perhaps at the threshold of a new and interesting phase of his career, passing from a direct portrayal of men and society to allegory, fantasy, prophecy and experimentation with a portrayal of the phenomenon of time by an artistic mingling of the contemporary and the cosmic, resulting not only in an ironic commentary on the present but also elevating it into a projection of certain archetypal patterns of characters and events which tend to repeat themselves over and over again in the long and limitless span of time.

Keywords: Materialism, Utilitarianism, Tandava, Orientalism.

Joshi's novels provide an Indian response, although a critical response, to the challenges of our time. Modernism in literature demands a cumulative exploration of the inner dimensions of the characters as modern age stress and restless, questing spirit of man. Arun Joshi's novel, *The City and the River* is a departure from the existing oeuvre of Arun Joshi as it is 'a commentary on the times'<sup>1</sup> and 'a political parable'<sup>2</sup>. However, *The City and the River*, despite its unique form of prophecy, fantasy and politics has been often appreciated as 'a continuation of and an improvement upon Joshi's major thematic concerns.'<sup>3</sup> To avoid controversy, Joshi has set his book as Amur says, in 'a temporal setting which is deliberately confused.'<sup>4</sup>

The image of *The City and the River* is very vast; there are eleven sections in it including a prologue and an epilogue which encompass within their range time, God, Man and Nature. The novel unlocks with a Prologue, which is set in an imaginary locale, the scene of action is Nowhere City. The two persons or characters, who open the story of mankind with all its moral

degeneration and regeneration, are the teacher, the ageless Yogeshwara and his disciple, 'the Nameless-One'. They have lived together for thirty years in a hermitage amidst snow-covered mountains. In the evening of his thirtieth birthday, the Yogeshwara asks him to come to his cottage not only to hear 'a strange sorry tale'<sup>5</sup> but also to celebrate his birthday and to ascertain his identity. Before narrating the story to 'Nameless-One', his teacher offers to him a tumbler, full of peacock-feathers coloured elixir to warm up the mind or spirit of the former. After drinking tumbler full of elixir, 'the Nameless-one' gains also a kind of spiritual insight which may take him not only to visions of times past, but also of the coming generation of mankind. The opening chapter confirms the Guru-disciple tradition in which the old wise teacher or Guru prepares his keen disciple to enter a new world after the complete destruction of an old city:

'Do you hear music, my son'" asked the great Yogeshwara  
 'Yes, father. And the dancing of a god.'  
 'That is good. I shall tell you now a tale and, in my telling, perhaps you will know  
 who you are. Listen, this is how it goes.'<sup>6</sup>

The conversation is not an ordinary one because it relates to the creation and destruction of 'a city' which is every city. The sound of the dance is the dance tandava of Lord Shiva who dances to bring 'pralaya' in this world when it becomes unliveable for all. 'The Nameless-One' is matured enough to understand the symbolical or metaphorical tale of his teacher because the latter taught the former the secrets of the spirit. Moreover, when he has grown older, his teacher also taught him the ways of a pilgrim and of a warrior, so that he may maintain human values by fighting against the tyrants. That is why, the Great Yogeshwara suggests to his disciple:

Both kinds of thought I shall teach you. I shall lead you to the grain and I shall lead you to the chaff. Keep the grain and the chaff apart, always, for much harm has come of their mixing.<sup>7</sup>

The City and the River, unlike Joshi's earlier works, does not have a streak of autobiography; nor is it a story of personal, private lives. The novel is an ample 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.<sup>8</sup> The Great Yogeshwara narrates the events of the last cycle to the 'Nameless-One', who is an illegitimate child, sent on a raft into the unknown at the end of the cycle. The teacher asks his disciple to enter another similar world as another Hermit of the mountain to stop the 'endless repetition' and 'the periodic disintegration'<sup>9</sup> of the new city which is in the offing.

The occasion is the beginning of a new era but the Great Yogeshwara wants to inform his pupil about the past city and the cause of its end before the Nameless-One enters the new world. The main plot of the novel revolves around the familiar theme of power struggle. The Grand master, whom rules the city by the river, is determined to become its unchallenged king. The city has seven hills and people live on them according to their social status and profession which determine the geographical locations given to them on those hills. The Grand Master lives on the highest hill whereas the Minister occupies the other hills according to their position. The middle-class people live on a lower ground in pink brick buildings.

The lowly people including the boatmen live in an area along the river bank which is lowest in height. The councillors of the Grand Master include the minister of Trade, the Education adviser, the Astrologer, the Commissioner of Police, the Commander of the Army and General starch who assist the Grand Master upon time to time. The social stratifications a number of classes in the city indicates that its form and nature is very much like a contemporary city where the kind of class division results in political trickery and violence. The dramatic tension rises from the struggle between the Grand Master and the Boatmen. The Boatmen refuse to show their allegiance to the Grand Master because they owe their loyalty to the river. The River is their sacred mother because 'They (boatmen) consider themselves to be the children of the river, and the river and river alone do they hold allegiance. Of all the people, the Grand Master considers the boatmen to be most reasonable. The brick-People can be persuaded, appeared, and, if necessary, threatened. Even the mud-people could be made to agree. Things move smoothly, however, until one night the Grand Master has a dream that he becomes a king, sitting on top of a hill surrounded by the waters of a river. He seeks interpretation of the dream from the Astrologers who predicts the crowning of a king in place of the Grand Master. The Prophecy reads as follows:

The river, I see, from a teacher rise.  
The hermit, the parrot, the teacher die.  
Under a rain the waters burn  
To his kingdom at last the king returns.<sup>10</sup>

According to the Astrologer's interpretation, the Grand Master's dream suggests that the present Grand Master will be the king of the city in future as he says, 'yet such dreams come out of the depth of great truths and carry in them the truth of the times. It the times are troubled; the troubles must be faced. It is no secret that the city has become an unruly place, a plaything of asuras.'<sup>11</sup> To fulfil his dream, the Grand Master lets his coteries adopt ruthless measures to crush the masses.

As the first step to consolidate his position, the Grand Master asks the astrologer to announce 'The way of Three Beatitudes' in front of a large crowd which would lead to 'the era of ultimate Greatness.' The announcement of Three Beatitudes is something ambiguous for the common people:

One, the Grand Master of the city is the father and the mother of the city. All citizens are his children equally. Let them offer theory allegiance the Grand Master as a child to his father.

Two, The wealth of the city belongs to everyone. However, since there are too many of us, let it be resolved that henceforth there shall be one, and only one child to a mother and two to a home.

Three, while happiness and prosperity await the city and all those who follow the triple way, for him who chooses the opposite path and prefers to become a milestone round the city's neck let him be received without mercy and be treated according to . . . law of compassionate righteousness.<sup>12</sup>

The inauguration of the new era is made with the arrest of a boatman whose wife had borne an illegal child and of a clown who had been heard to laugh. In fact, the decree regarding the new era came as a surprise to the citizens and it filled them with fear and foreboding. When the Astrologer makes another attempt to take an oath of allegiance from the people, his plans must be with stiff resistance from the boat people. The head boatman says:

We have no quarrel with the Grand Master and we have no quarrel with you. If it is a matter of allegiance, our allegiance is only to the river and cannot be shared.<sup>13</sup>

The king order to let loose the state terrorism, and consequently a large number of arrests are made. The Education Adviser's ambition and shrewd mentality made him spiritually blind and he cannot follow the philosophy of the Great Hermit or Yogeshwara who says that the world belongs to God and let him be the king of what is his.

In 'The Lottery Stall' and 'The Return of the Teacher' Joshi describes the increasing opposition against the Grand Master and the action of Bhoma alias Bhumiputra, a teacher of mathematics, a 'scrawny' boatman. The boatmen under Bhumiputra struggle hard to maintain their authenticity in the Sartrean sense of the term. Sartre says: 'For the secret of a man is not his Oedipus Complex or his inferiority complex, it is the limit of his own liberty, his capacity for resisting fortune and death.'<sup>14</sup> Like Kurtz in Conrad's Heart of Darkness Bhoma wields great power over natives. He is considered by the police as the 'kingpin of a conspiracy'<sup>15</sup> against the

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Grand Master, and is arrested for making subversive propaganda at the university. Unlike other university teachers, Bhoma exposes the immoral and callous attitude of the Grand Master with the Parable of the Naked King:

By the end of two weeks the whole place was talking about Master Bhoma's parable. 'The King is Naked' became a slogan, a cry of revolt. One morning an entire wall was found decorated with it . . . At the end of the fortnight the staff secretary called Bhoma and told him to stop preaching his parable, or face serious consequences.<sup>16</sup>

Bhoma finds himself in the grips of fear but before he has surrendered himself shamelessly to the spineless authorities, the Hermit of the Mountain meets him and helps him in realizing his duty towards troubled Humanity. The great Hermit exhorts him:

'You have been chosen to speak. The river has chosen you to speak with the tongue of men what they cannot hear in her troubled lament.'<sup>17</sup>

The Hermit tells despondent Bhoma about his own experience:

I learnt that nothing enfeebled man more than fear, that nothing but fear stood between him and his liberation . . . and I saw that where men had thrown off his blanket of fear their alone truth had triumphed and great civilization flourished and man had taken another step towards God.<sup>18</sup>

In the words of Hermit, we find reverberations of the Gita, and Bhoma chooses to act dutifully in the larger interest of the city. The Grand Master, threatened by the possibility of a revolt, gets Bhoma arrested but he escapes to the great consternation of the authorities.

The Professor, who takes up the cause of Bhoma, is condemned to the Goldmines. The news of Professor's death and the sad plight of the Headmen results in the strike of the boatmen leading to a complete disruption of river transport in the city. Due to internal rivalries and a secret deal between the Education Adviser and the Minister of Trade, the shock Brigades which consist of students and teachers join the boatman and give the Commissioner a humiliating defeat. A Second Deed of National Partnership is signed between the Army and the Minister of Trade for Grand Mastership of the city. Thus, it is clear that the city has reached its hour of crisis and the administrative machinery of the city is cracking slowly. As Usha Bande aptly remarks: 'In its demonic image, the city becomes the city of destruction, a great ruin of pride.'<sup>19</sup> The

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circumstances of the city suggest to the Great Hermit that there is no time left to mend. He puts the same question to the river:

What should I do? . . . Is there still time?  
Is there hope? Is there a point?<sup>20</sup>

After making a study of the City's horoscope, the Great Hermit sends it to the court astrologer for further interpretation:

Astrologer, I send you my greetings. What I send you herewith you will doubtless recognize. The wheel has nearly come full circle. The hour of God is upon us and the time is short . . . More than the future of a king, Astrologer, what is involved here is the future of a city, a civilization. I hope you will not misunderstand. And now, Farewell till in another birth we meet again.<sup>21</sup>

The river continues to rise with music of drums and engulfs each and everything in the city in its domain. Before his death, the Hermit performs his last yajna of the immortal Time and his consort, the river, to nullify the blasphemy committed by the Astrologer. For the Grand Master and his allies, the river becomes an identity of horror and awe, and all of them perish in the river water. The Great Yogeshwara concludes the story by saying that,

For seven days and seven nights it rained without a stop. On the eighth day the sun rose and from a clear sky stared down at a vast sea of water.<sup>22</sup>

As Usha Bande aptly remarks: 'The river is the life-line of the city. Like blood circulating in the human body, it circulates through the city. Questers turn to it to venture forth on its current.'<sup>23</sup> Moreover we may also cite few lines from T.S. Eliot while describing the rise and fall of the city: 'In my beginning is my end, In succession / Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended/ Are removed, destroyed, restored.' The Prologue and the Epilogue join the beginning and the end; and the story ends where it begins and begins where it ends. In the Epilogue, the great Yogeshwara unfolds the future course of action to the Nameless-One:

...There is another council and another set of councilors. The men have other names but the forces they embody remain unchanged. And into all this when you go you will, perhaps, be known as another Hermit of the Mountain. And it is possible you will have a disciple whose name will be little star.<sup>24</sup>

Hence the novel ends with the basic principle of Hindu Philosophy which teaches an affirmative attitude to life. This element of hope and optimism is found in the message of Great Yogeshwara

who is sending his disciple to teach people the significance of prayer, faith and understanding to the new city.

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