

Struggle for Allegiance in Arun Joshi's

The City and the River

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Expanding the canvas of his writing, Arun Joshi produces *The City and the River* (1991) on its individual to social bubble of life where he delves in the particular instant of the social scenario of Indian society. He leaves the complete grip of individual existential vision of life only enlarging it to the mass or crowd. The novel is, in fact, a satire or commentary on the Emergency, applied by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi during the 1974-75, which is indeed a black spot on a Democratic country like India. Joshi replicates the actual segment of the Emergency in the form of parable with the multi-layered conceptions of social identity, ambition, freedom, tyranny, corruption, anxiety, murder, bloodshed, spiritual vision and so on. Exposing the condition of Delhi during 1970s and its beautification at the larger extent, M.K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan write:

...a scathing indictment of the notorious Emergency proclaimed by Indira Gandhi in 1975, mainly to preserve her power at all costs. The fundamental rights were suspended, and her brutal power- drunk son, Sanjay, let loose a reign of terror in Delhi, demolishing wantonly the huts of the poor in the name of beautification of the city and restoring to discriminate and forced sterilization as part of population control. (Naik28)

As a socio-political parable, the novel is demarcation on the principles of growth, prophesy, security and control, preserving of human values and faith. Joshi's creed on the Eastern and Western philosophy again reflects with parabolic story and imaginary characters of the novel. His artisanship comes out with his intricate interwoven metaphysical and political function of human values.

As a political parable, the novel essentially, deflects all the aspiration of the lower class people with their existence and their conflict with the upper class people. The novel revolves around the conflict between democracy and aristocracy, upper class and lower class, social world and natural world, city and river, virtues and vices, and indeed God and man. The title of the novel itself, a general assumption of Joshi, that somewhere reflects the Karmik Principle of *the Gita* with its suffused indigenous sensibility of cultural and spiritual ethos. Conflict is the taste of human life, without it, man's life remain full of dullness, dismay, tasteless and more often meaningless. In other words, conflict is the soul of human life where his real identity is judged on the basis of conflict, suffering and struggle to face odd situation of life that lead him toward the zenith where he or she shines like a diamond. Human suffering and conflict are, in fact, the challenge for those who stand like a rock to face any problem by their will power. Touching the feet of the philosophical vision of life, Joshi, indeed almost, in all in his novels, unveils it with the identity problem of man. Since he believes that ego, passion, desire, and over-ambition lead men toward the world of destruction where often-innocent people also have to suffer.

The City and the River has been a landmark in the history of Indian-English novels that in actual sense, is the revelation of power struggle with the identity problem of mass or group. Joshi's innermost creativity and his whole experience of life delve in his last novel where he deals with social, political economic, religious or spiritual and natural visions of man's ideologies. The novel holds the striking notes of human affairs with fantasy, prophesy, myths, and legends with Indian philosophy. The struggle between Boatmen and Grand Master's men begin on the issue of allegiance that flows from beginning to the end of the novel. Desire, ego, ambition, and power deprive man from the spiritual aspiration of life; man becomes cruel, inhuman, and senseless in such deadly vices where he forgets his existence of being a creation of God as well. As in the novel, Grand Master, the most powerful person, has a great desire to rule and govern alone over the city by keeping everyone under his control in which he almost gets success but the boatmen or mud people stand against his motive. As it is generally considered that desire and passions are the principal signs of the knot of ego in which man sells his happiness, peace, satisfaction, joy, light, and honesty from his life. As Shri Aurobindo writes in his *Essays on the Gita*:

Desire brings always confusion of the mind and limitation of the will, an egoistic and distorted view of things... Desire and its preferences and violence are the first strong root of sin and error. There can be while you cherish desire

no assured stainless tranquillity, no settled light, no calm pure knowledge... Desire, if permitted to remain whatever colour, is a perpetual menace even that he wisest and can at any moment subtly or violently cast down the mind from even its firmest and most surely acquired foundation. Desire is the chief enemy of spiritual perfection. (Aurobindo, 582-83)

Grand Master's ambition to rule over the city has always been challenged by boatmen, who for the completion of his desire appoints his very close and trusted man Astrologer to convince them to accept his proposal. However, boatmen are firm on their will, since for them holy river is mother, Goddess and regeneration, and in order to prove their reliance with river they were always ready to sacrifice themselves. The beginning of struggle for the adherence continues but the boatmen are not ready to connect themselves at any rate with Grand Master. The Headman, a woman, head of boatmen, argues firmly on the matter of her allegiance saying, "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, that is all that I want to say." (19) The easygoing life of boatmen is disturbed by Grand Master's ambition and ego, as he uses every way to pursue them, for which Astrologer goes to convince them. Convincing them, he delivers enthusiastic and philosophical speeches, as he says to the Headman:

My children, God have sent the Grand Master to be your servant. Looking after this city is like a 'yajna' for him, his life is the 'ahuti'. These were words from an ancient tongue that no one understood, but there was a good deal of applause. So moved was an old boatman that he burst into tears... A large number of 'asuras' have taken human form and descended to disturb the 'yajna'. (17)

Further he says, "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 their allegiance to the Grand Master as a child to his father." (17) But Boatmen were not ready to accept Astrologer's recommendation of Grand Master; even they become violent and revolt against Grand Master's notice in opposition to boatmen's strength. Joshi hereby, harshly comments on Indira Gandhi, on the population control of India only in a parabolic sense of the story.

Boatmen, as a lower class people used to live around the bank of river for the ages, they have been brought up under her shadow and shower, their childhood passed in her lap, so they consider the holy river their mother and Goddess. In fact, they believe that their

authentic identity and freedom exist with the river, therefore their allegiance and devotion with Her is unbreakable permanent and eternal. Even they used to talk to her and share their emotion, feeling and desire in any circumstances. Boatmen and other see their real images in Her and get inspiration in any critical moments of life. The Professor, half hero of the novel, lonely in exhausted, painful and pitiable condition usually sits every evening on the granite pillar of the river bank where he says to her, “Isn’t it this that you want? Something like me peaceful and infinite and free?”(29) He even recalls how in his childhood, he used to talk to river and playing fearlessly around Her bank. As Jasbir Jain writes, “The river, being source of life, is viewed as a source of continuity and carries within it all the richness of water as symbol. All life comes from water, hence the river represents fertility. The Vedas refer to water as ‘matritamah’, the most maternal.”(Jasbir, 62) Indeed boatmen’s relation with river is child-mother relation that Satan like Grand Master tries to break. They were the owner, master and king of their will, so no one has right to break their free will and life. They never accept to pass slavish life under the pressure of anyone. Although they are sub-marginalised, bourgeois or lower class people, yet they are satisfied with their condition, since they are completely devoid of any psychological problem, ennui, frustration or mental conflicts. The conception of individualism and humanism flow in their blood, which often recalls Satan’s ideology, will and speeches that he delivers to his comrades from the Pandemonium after being expelled from the Paradise that John Milton writes in his heroic and epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667),

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n
The associates and co-partners of our loss
Lye thus astonished on the’ oblivious Pool...(Line 262-266, P.9-10)

Nevertheless, Grand Master is also firm on his will, therefore, in possession of power he castes hundreds of the boatmen to the jail and Goldmine with their Head and leader Bhoma the later half hero of the novel. Therefore, with the strife for allegiance, the story moves further which discloses actual face of tyranny, corruption, rudeness, cruelty and inhumanity of the Grand Master. He uses police, army, businesspersons, and all the political leaders to win the conscience of boatmen. It is generally considered that man’s real and authentic existence prevails or survives in freedom. Talking about freedom in his book *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre writes, “Freedom is nothing but the existence of our will or of our passions in so far as this existence is the nihilation, that is, the existence of a being

which is its being in the mode of having to be it.”(466) Similarly Martine Heidegger believes that man’s authentic freedom prevails in sacrifice or death. The unbreakable will power keeps them firm and conscious about their allegiance. Service under Grand Master’s supervision was no better than that of humiliation so they consider that unless the river flows their existence will remain with them. The flow of liberty continues with man’s trust and his resistance, so in response to the authenticity in freedom, Usha Bande cites Sartre’s idea in his article, “Toward Authenticity: A Study of *The City and the River*”, “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.”(Binde 270)

Grand Master turns into dictator in possession of power, and starts smothering the voices of boatmen by killing them one by one and sometimes in a mob. After the death of the Professor in Gold Mine, boatmen become uncontrolled, and their violent strike obliterates the peace and prosperity of the city. Since boatmen still not ready to relate themselves with Grand Master, the knot of their faith in river was becoming deeper and deeper. Boatmen’s primitive belief in nature somewhere takes them toward intuitive look that their soul always calls. Their love for Nature in the form of pantheism, recalls the message of *the Gita*, that Shri Aurobindo writes:

In its outer appearance the truth of existence is solely what we call Nature or Prakriti, a Force that operates as the whole law and mechanism of being, creates the world which is the object of our mind and senses and creates too the mind and senses as a means of relation between the creature and the objective world in which we live.(Aurobindo,573)

Similarly Radhakrishnan writes Lord Krishna’s message in his book *The Bhagavadgita*:

Prakrtim svamavastabhya Visrjami purah purah

Bhutagramamimam Krisnamavasam prakrtervasat

(Taking hold of Nature, which is My own, I send forth again and again all this multitude of beings which are helpless, being under the control of nature ‘Prakriti’) Chapt.9, 8

The City and the River is, at one level, is an account of the cynical and madness of humankind in which struggle between power and resistance demands sacrifice. Sacrifice is only way through which man becomes pure therefore boatmen in the name of river were ready to sacrifice themselves. Their absurd belief in river spontaneously overflows with the developing story clearing their dependency on her. After losing Headman and Professor, Bhoma is supposed to the gift for boatmen, who always functions as a leader for them.

However, Bhoma, as a teacher used to believe in non-violence, therefore after confronting the massacre of two hundred boatmen in the hall in sleeping position he changes his mind-set turns into non-violence therefore he himself convinces boatmen to stop the violent strike which has shaken the root of his heart and soul. He knew that the violence ultimately leads toward destruction of humanity, but the Headman does not agree on his wishes indeed she wanted to take revenge of her humiliation and killing of boatmen, as she says, “Boatmen are children of the river. They have learnt more from her than meets the eye. Each moment the river dies and each moment she is reborn. Death is certain to all and there is a reason to die...the course of our struggle is set. Let it run.”(208) As O.P. Mathur writes the philosophical perspective of life of sacrifice, “Man can attain salvation and conquer the recurrent cycles of birth and death, creation and disintegration, through self-purification to be attained through suffering and sacrifice.”(100) The conflict between Grand Master and boatmen leads the city toward destruction, which Great Hermit already knew. By the end of the novel, the river Herself shows her rage to remove the tyranny of Grand Master. She engulfs everyone and everything of the city, in which Grand Master’s ambition and desire to rule over the city with his Empire of Seven Hills is also perished. So the holy River, mother of boatmen and takes revenge by destroying the bliss of Grand Master.

Grand master’s autocracy crosses its limit, which meets with the destruction of the city where still Joshi gives an echo of the existential sphere of mud people. The quest for authenticity revolves around the modern life with its recurrent motif that Joshi somewhere adds with The Angry Young man, Black Humour and Absurd Movement in America. Therefore Shankar Kumar writes in his book, “...underline the need to protect the authenticity of the self against the determining categories symbolized by the power of State, the military bureaucracy, and constricting social institutions.”(Shankar, 85) Joshi discloses the Indian history in its deep-rooted parabolic form where he formulates the existential tenets of emptiness, absurdity, freedom, and anxiety with the boatmen’s absurd trust in nature. From fantasy to realism, the story of the novel revolves around the ancient to the modern approach of life. Joshi himself fuses the old and new prophesy of life that he writes in the form of epigraph of the novel:

Who knows, who can read the signs
The working of immortal time?
A king I see upon the boatmen mourn
A thing of darkness growing dark,

On the city walls the shadow's mark.

The river, I see, from a teacher rise.

The hermit, the parrot, the teacher dies.

Under the rain the waters burn

To his kingdom at least the king returns. (*The City and the River*)

Joshi at first, changes the structure of the novel by means of the prologue and epilogue with nine more chapters in the novel. The narrator is Great Yogeshwara who tells the sorry-tale to his disciple Nameless-One about the imagined city and river and its clash for the adherence between Grand Master and boatmen. Unlike the earlier novels, the narrator does not take active role in it but his prophesy regarding the fortune of the city and river unfolds his spiritual and divine power. The evolution of civilization orbits in cyclical form, in which the story is inter-connected to another, as after the annihilation of the city, a new city generates. However, the flow of the river does not stop, the Great Yogeshwara tells Nameless-One, "On the ruins of that city, as always happens, a new city is risen. It is ruled by another Grand Master, which, of course, need not always happen. In the new city is another Professor, another Bhumiputra, another tribe of boatmen..." (262) The repetition of things again possesses the human values with the growth of human predicament where with the passage of time the conflict starts between a new Grand Master and boatmen. The regeneration of humanity revitalizes the unstoppable conflicts of men to hold the power that indeed corrupts everyone even it blocks the thinking power of men. The cycle of suffering and sacrifice goes on in a parallel smudge, as in all rounds the Almighty or God holds the hands of someone whose purity is examined in the stake of suffering and sacrifice. Boatmen's suffering is the assessment of their life where they do not bestow before the tyranny of Grand Master. The Little Star speaks the philosophical vision of human suffering to the Hermit, "This man's suffering is very great, for he is not used to such things. Hour after hour he slips from the world, shrinking within from the touch of pain that now suffuses his very cells." (165-66)

Thus, Joshi's exploration in *The City and the River* is somewhat his regular experiences of life that consist its ripeness with the flow of his natural and social ideas. The conflict between Grand Master's men and Boatmen are not in common sense the strife of men, in fact it is collapse of virtue vs. vices, nature vs. social, good vs. bad, and God vs. man. The problem of allegiance still remain a question as great Yogeshwara, tells about the reconstruction of a new city, river, Grand Master and boatmen, indeed its Joshi's philosophical

visualization in which he lets everyone see the conflict between virtue and evil that essentially continues permanently or timelessly. But the destruction of the city leaves rather a philosophical outset that whenever devil like Grand Master crosses the line of being a human or behaves like demon, then either God or nature punishes or destroys devil's bliss and re-establish a new world which continues in cyclical form. The destructive form of nature at the end of the novel recalls the spiritual message of Lord Krishna where He says to Arjun that whenever the world faces the decay of religion and humanity, He takes a new incarnation in any form, which Radhakrishnan writes, in his book:

Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati bharata

Abhyutthanamadharmasya tadatmanam srjamyaham.

(Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata(Arjun), then I send forth (create incarnate) Myself. (Chapt.4, 7)

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