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Exemplifications of Struggle for Identity and Power in Arun Joshi's *The City and the River*

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine Arun Joshi's *The City and the River*. It is an existential critique on the absurdity of human condition and circumstances. It probes the plight of the entire humanity represented by the city. It has an equitably ample canvas and deals with the interrelation of man with other men, with God with and Nature and the evolution of mankind from creation to dissolution. In the novel, Arun Joshi endeavours to sketch the chaos and dilemma of the modern man who is challenged and encountered by the self and the questioning of his life and existence, which is woefully conscious of his hazardous circumstances in an unsympathetic world. Arun Joshi

explores deep into the inner niche of human mind where he finds sentiments, emotions, instincts and impulses at work.

Keywords: Predicament, Power, Psyche, Self, Emotions, Modern Man, Identity

Arun Joshi is one of the perspicacious contemporary Indian English novelists who have attempted to deal with the predicament of modern man in their works. He explores the inner psyche of the protagonists. Imbued with a congenital urge to define their identity in relation to themselves, to their society and to humanity at large, his protagonists take plunge into the extremely trying situations and combat with them in their peculiar ways. Though he is influenced by the Western Existentialism, his philosophical inclinations basically are towards Hinduism. In his novels, several forms of man's spiritual quest are manifested. Though Arun Joshi's protagonists are surrounded by affluence and sophistication, they mark themselves as outsiders. They prove to be misfits in an apparently satisfactory environment of materialistic age where something priceless - the deeper poise of the spirit - is missing. The quest for values, which could serve as a vital part of faith and conviction, tosses them from one alternative to another leaving them battered and emaciated. This exploration is not a smooth process and has its blemishes and bruises. The tormenting experience concludes in resolving the tension, though implicit and far-fetched it might appear. The human existence is often baffled by the conflict between human self and his environment.

Arun Joshi's *The City and the River* explores the predicament of his characters in this indifferent and hostile world. His novel is both a departure and a continuation of his earlier fictional works. His earlier novels are mainly engrossed with the existential dilemma of his protagonists. This proclivity of Arun Joshi still endures in *The City and the River* but here his canvas has grown larger and the crisis of an individual has been replaced by the political, social, and existential crisis of the "City" and by ramification of the entire humanity. This

novel is a departure from the existing oeuvre of Arun Joshi, since it delineates the political shenanigans indulged in by the rulers of the city. It represents a critique on the political structure of the times. There are explicit resemblances between the Emergency regime of 1974-75 in India and the one depicted in the novel. In the novel, to straighten the road, called the Avenue Great River, so many houses and huts get bulldozed. It takes effect because the wife of Grand Master ponders that it will make the perspective lovely, "How much nicer would the view be if there were a straight road running from here to the river" (37). It reminds of several such actions in the name of adornment, "Sundarikaran" of Delhi at Emergency time.

The power-structure is also very much parallel to that of the Emergency. The strengthening of power by the Grand Master, the Head of the City (P.M.) to the extent of enthroning himself as the King with immeasurable powers reminds of the then tyrannical rule in Indian political history. The crowning of the Grand Master's son as the heir-apparent is emblematic of the then Prime Minister's son becoming all powerful and authoritative. There is a coterie of fawning and aggrandizing councillors, paying scraping homage to the Grand Master and always misguiding him and thereby remaining in the limelight and advancing their hierarchal position in the administrative set-up of the Government. The Grand Master always remains surrounded by the sycophants like the Rallies Master, who arranges rallies in his support to make him believe that his subjects love him. The principal trio, including the Commissioner of Police, the Education Adviser and the Master of Rallies, makes schemes to accomplish their private ends. The Grand Master and his Advisory Council embrace all kinds of method to preserve their rule.

In the Grand Master's "City," conscription, brutality, fury, devastation, avarice, crookedness, duplicity, and deception prevail the political and administrative structure of society. The incidents depicted in the novel, reminds us of the days of the Emergency in

India. The after-effects of these incidents prove to be very catastrophic in the same manner as it did in the case of the then Prime Minister of India. It not only destroys the political image but the wrong-doers also suffer. According to Arun Joshi, one who abuses the power will definitely be punished. He will have to pay for his deed eventually. Even, if the offender gets success in abolishing his temporal adversaries, the even-handed Divine Justice, the God Himself comes forward to punish him. The same thing happens in this novel also. All the dissenters of the Grand Master and his councillors fail in their defiance.

The headman, actually a woman, of boatmen becomes blind and later on, her own followers give up her. Bhoma's statement that the King is naked comes to an end when he stays with the Grandfather and later on dies when the Son destroys the Grandfather's house in an attempt to arrest him. The Professor dies because of his fast in prison. Shailaja's brother immolates himself. Thereby, their revolution comes to an end. But when human being fail, the Nature itself comes forward to punish the culprits. A flood comes in the River and the King "gazed at the vast sea in a stunned silence" (257). "The inmates of the palace shuddered in horror as the new Grand Master's building broke in the middle and floor by floor, frame by frame, fell into the sea. One last wave uprooted the foundations and sent them flying into the sky. The waters swept over the top of the hill and cascaded on the other side in a loud waterfall" (258). In this way, *The City and the River* exists as a powerful commentary on the political framework of the past, the present and the future and thereby it surely claims an authorized place among the political novels of the day. Though it is a political novel, in many ways it is a continuation of Arun Joshi's earlier fictional works. It can be said an existentialist commentary on the absurdity of human situation. In "Quest for Meaning in Arun Joshi's Novels," R. S. Pathak says, "In this novel also Arun Joshi poses significant question about identity, commitment and faith. But these questions are approached from the standpoint of politics" (63).

Eventually, power-struggle and in-fighting leads to complete destruction and the city are doomed. But, after this doom, a new city emerges like phoenix on the ruins of the old and, in this way; the unending cyclic process goes on for good. A New Era of Ultimate Greatness begins. The river of life flows on. The Seven Hills with new faces continue to rule. A new King, another Grand Master and another Hermit of Mountain show up on the scene to execute their roles. The middle and the high class, lacking in authenticity, get themselves adjusted to the situation they are put in and never protest. The level of authenticity is inversely proportional to the social status of the different categories of inhabitants.

The social stratification of the City is reflected by the altitude at which the different classes of people live. If one regards the high-class people, the Grand Master dwells on the topmost mountain and the Ministers govern the City from the Seven Hills. The position of the Ministers surviving there differs in accordance with the Seven Hills' altitude. In the City, the middle-class people survive on a relatively lower ground in the colony of pink-brick apartments. The lowborn poor, the boatmen exist in the huts by the riverbank, which are the under-most in altitude. But the poorest and lowliest boatmen are the most remarkable in the true sense of the term because they do what they like, and lead an authentic life. Though the middle-class people dwelling in pink-brick portions are substandard to the boatmen, they are very much superior to the high-class people in this perspective.

The middle-class people have no authenticity because they adapt themselves to the circumstances they are put in. They do not practise what they feel like doing and they do not mind it too. They have become accustomed to this imposed life. They do not protest. But if we compare the middle-class people with those of high class, they are not as thick-skinned as the high class people are. There are some persons in the middle class who slowly come to confront the reality of their situation. They begin to realize their hypocrisy and to chafe under the burden of "Bad Faith" and thereby breakdown. For instance, Dharma, a police officer,

and his father, a high official in the administration, come to have nervous breakdown because of the realization of the loss of their authenticity. Dharma, after his breakdown, begins to imagine himself a boatman. He dresses himself like a boatman, and thus, tries to expiate for the faults committed in his capacity.

Dharma's father progressively becomes a total debacle and starts to languish. The Education Adviser, the Astrologer, the Minister of Trade, the Master of Rallies, the Commander of the Army the Commissioner of Police, and the General Starch are the spokespersons of the high-class people. The people held by this very class most awfully lack in trustworthiness and authenticity. These people are the most corrupted, hypocrites, morally bankrupt, fraudulent, and dishonest. The Grand Master proclaims the Era of Ultimate Greatness and endeavours to make everyone think that it is for the prosperity and welfare of the City. The Grand Master propagates this news among people to misguide them because the real motif behind this proclamation is to reinforce his own position and to pave the way for the fulfilment of his dream of becoming the King. To attain this, he and his ministers execute "Bad Faith." The Grand Master trusts only in admitting the demands of the people. He never really resolves to implement them. The Grand Master and his sycophant and greedy councillors, surviving at the Seven Hills, badly lack in leading a real and authentic life. The Ministers fail to pass through the nature of their "freedom," freedom to become "for-itself" or "in-itself."

Among the brick-people, too, are some who are concerned about the authenticity of their selves. For instance, there is the Professor, who is much interested in astronomy. He gives up everything in search of his pupil who is supposed to have been arrested by police in one of their secret swoops. He does not hesitate to sacrifice even his life for his purpose. However, he gets warned to desist from doing so, yet he continues with his search and consequently gets consigned to the Gold Mines. In the Gold Mines, he languishes to death.

The Grandfather, Dharma's father's father, who significantly cultivates exotic and unique roses on his farm in barren and lifeless city, is another person who courageously opposes the Grand Master's powerful but absurd rules. He dares to keep Bhoma at his farm and, thereby, risks his own life. Eventually, he, along with Dharma, Shailaza and Bhoma, loses his life in the massive attack launched by the armed forces of the Grand Master. In *The City and the River*, Arun Joshi attempts to portray his own solution to the problem surfacing out of one's awareness of the meaninglessness or purposelessness in life. The most destructive impact that ubiquitous meaninglessness can have is the suppression of spontaneity of the individual's personality, which has been conceived in terms of the spontaneous assertion of one's individual initiative opinions, feelings, wishes, and dreams.

To conclude, *The City and the River* is far more sanguine than Arun Joshi's earlier novels. He agrees the existence of evil but wants to reassure that it cannot last forever. *The City and the River* does not constitute a departure from Arun Joshi's concern to explore the existential predicament of man but goes one step further in suggesting man's metaphysical reconciliation as an answer to all his worries, agonies and alienation. He affirms the relevance of God to man in his life: "Here, there, in you, in me in that beggarly boatman and his boat, in all you see and you do not see, the world belongs to God" (70). The final message of the novel is summed up in the Great Yogeshwara's words: "His is the Will. His is the Force" (264) and so an unquestionable faith in God and surrender to Him is the only solution to our threatened existence. *The City and the River* by its theme and execution proves that Arun Joshi has been deeply influenced by the Hindu existential vision and the novel continues the spiritual quest of his earlier novels through measured rhythms and myths, legends and archetypes. In the end of the novel, one may feel like completing a quest and it is a universal human quest for affirmation through negation of self. The question is not of individual success or failure but of collective efforts for the common good, Arun Joshi's obsessive

preoccupation with man and his situation is his forte and he has explored its staggering variety with rare perspicacity and acumen.

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