

**DEPARTURE FROM THE EXISTENTIALIST PATH: THE PATH OF  
SELF-ROLES IN THE SOCIETAL NEW WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO *THE CITY AND THE RIVER* BY ARUN JOSHI**

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Arun Joshi's fifth and last novel, *The City and the River*, was first published in 1990. The speciality of this novel consists in its being a departure from existential path as well as a continuation of Joshi's earlier fictional endeavors. *The City and the River* strikes an entirely different theme from Arun Joshi's earlier novels. At one level, it is a parable of the times; at another, it deals with how men, in essence entirely free to choose, create by their choice the circumstances in which they must live. The novel is a departure from the existing oeuvre of Arun Joshi in as much as it is "a commentary on the times" and "apolitical"<sup>1</sup>. It presents a critique on the political scenario of the times.

The novelist holds the view that one who misuses power cannot escape punishment. It does come sooner or later. Thus, in so far as the novel exists as a powerful commentary on the political scenario of the past, the present, and the future, it rightly claims a privileged place among the political novels of our literature. But in many ways it remains a continuation of Arun Joshi's earlier novels. It is an existentialist commentary on the absurdity of human situation. Like his earlier novels, herein, too, he continues to explore the existential and hostile world. Critics are almost unanimous about this aspect of his novels which have a distinguishing mark of their own and which certainly differ from those of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Malgonkar and many other Indian English novelists. Madhusudan Prasad observes that

"They (Joshi's novels) are singularized by certain existentialist problems and the resultant anger, agony, psychic quest and the like"<sup>2</sup>.

Inna Walter, commenting on *The Last Labyrinth*, says that "Arun Joshi plunges deeper into the depths of the eternal queries that have perplexed man's consciousness from time immemorial"<sup>3</sup>. Ramesh K. Srivastava observes "Most of Arun Joshi's heroes are alienated beings"<sup>5</sup>. R.K. Dhawan believes that

"Joshi's fictional World' is a revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the question of his existence"<sup>4</sup>.

The main plot of the novel revolves around the theme of power struggle. The Grand Master rules the city by the river and is determined to become its unchallenged king. His

schemes meet with stiff resistance from the boatmen who ride use to fall in line with the Seven Hills. Their leader, the Headman, tells the Astrologer:

"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..." 5

Their refusal accentuates the conflict-the conflict between *The City and the River*, between the Grand Master and the boatmen, between the urge to dominate and the desire to assert one's identity. This conflict is the life and the soul of the plot. The atmosphere of the City is absolutely unnatural and chaotic. It reminds us of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. To quote Arun Joshi,

"In the city's newly laid parks and along its well-straightened avenues and on the Seven Hills, however, in spite of the chief horticulturist's strenuous efforts, and to the Grand Master's great regret, neither grass nor flowers grow". (136).

It is natural that in an unnatural atmosphere like this even sensible persons suffer from certain existentialist emotions like alienation, weariness, rootlessness, boredom and meaninglessness. For instance, there is the Rallies Master who is known to be "an unhappy man", and the real cause of his unhappiness is rootlessness:

"His misfortune lay in the fact that instead of teaching him how to row a boat his parents had wanted him to join the ranks of the brick-people... The boatmen did not have the money to hire him, the brick-people considered him an upstart", (71).

In such a world as this, the protagonist is bound to create his own values which determine the way of his life. Judged from this point of view, it is only the poor boatmen living in the mud huts by the side of the river who lead an authentic existence. They are prepared to pay the price they are supposed to for the life they lead. Simple as they are, they are far away from being mere simpletons. They have the courage to be honest and bold and are able to call spade a spade. The high class and middle class people lack in authenticity as they get themselves adjusted to the social status of the inhabitants.

The social stratification is signified by the height at which the different classes of people live. Among the high class people, the Grand Master lives on the highest hill and the Ministers live and administrator in the City from the Seven Hills. Their status varies according to the altitude at which they live. The class people live on a comparatively lower ground in the colony of brick houses. The boatmen live in the area along the river bank which is the lowest in altitude. But the and the poorest boatmen living in the mud huts are the most superior as they do what they feel like doing and, thus, lead an authentic existence. The second category of the middle class people living in pink colored brick buildings is inferior to the boatmen but far superior to the high class people in this regard. The middle class men lack in authenticity as they adapt themselves to the situation and they do not practice what they feel like doing.

They do not protest but comparatively they are not as thick-skinned as the people belonging to the highest class are. More often than not, the middle class men slowly come to confront the reality of their situation. They come to realize their hypocrisy and begin to chafe under the burden of "bad faith" and consequently break down. For example, Dharma and his father come to have nervous breakdown on account of the realization of the loss of their authenticity. Dharma dresses himself like a boatman making atonement for the faults committed in his official capacity. Dharma's father gradually becomes a complete wreck.

The highest class people most terribly lack in authenticity. They are the most corrupt, morally bankrupt, hypocrites. They are big frauds. The Grand Master declares the Era of ultimate greatness for the welfare and prosperity of the City, but the main motif behind the declaration is to consolidate his own position and pave the way for the realization of his dream of becoming the King. He and his Ministers practice "Bad Faith". The Grand Master simply believes in accepting the demands of the people but never really intends to implement them. Once he very clearly instructs the Astrologer to issue a decree but not to think of implementing it:

"Issuing a decree, Astrologer, does not mean its immediate implementation". (168).

The Grand Master and his sycophant coterie of over-ambitious Ministers like the Minister of Trade, the Education Adviser, the Master of Rallies, the Astrologer, the Commissioner of Police, the Commander of the Army, General Starch are the group of persons living at the highest altitude of the Seven Hills, but they miserably lack in leading an authentic life. The Ministers fail to probe the nature of their "freedom", freedom to become "for-itself" or "in-self". The novelist seems to suggest his own solution to the problem arising out of one's awareness of the lack of purpose or meaning in life. The most damaging effect is the stifling of spontaneity of the individual's personality which has been conceived in terms of the

"spontaneous assertion of (one's) individual initiative, feelings, wishes, and opinions."<sup>6</sup>

A realization of the meaninglessness in life is a prelude to its diagnosis and cure. According to Knoff, the process of creating meaninglessness itself becomes centrally meaningful. Beckett holds that various states of alienation, including meaninglessness, tend to become in proper hands quests for value, significance, meaning and transcendence.<sup>11</sup> *In The City and the River*, "only the great river knows the true meaning (228). The City, however, abounds in "tall structures of steel and glass" (12), but it is "falling apart". (199).

*The City and the River*, shows that the ruler in the novel resorts to two types of Malpractice: the mean methods adopted to gain and retain power and the foul means resorted to for wiping out dissents. The Grand Master who rules the City has the ulterior motive of becoming an omnipotent dictator. He pretends to be a benign ruler dedicated to the people and their well-being. The Rallies Master and the Master of Trade act as his tools aiding and abetting him using all cunning tactics.

The narrator satirizes the efforts of entrusting a man with power under the pretext of obliging the country. An overt satirization is revealed in the speech of the Master of Trade:

"At one go every tradition of the city is abandoned. But even that does not satisfy the Grand Master. He must crown the Son as well, make him an heir apparent above the heads of all of us, put him on the Advisory Council, and in days to come, train him for a thousand mischiefs". (111)

A glaring impropriety is found in the Grand Master's ambition of equating himself with the nation. Again the Astrologer jumps into the scene to promote the evil designs of the ruler. He identifies the scene to promote the evil designs of the ruler. Another example of the misrule of the Grand Master is the misuse of public funds to satisfy the whims of their family members rather than meet the needs of the people. The poor people who have lost their homes and huts in the process of straightening the palace road, have been exhorted to accept poverty on the plea that they belong to a country whose civilization is spiritual rather than material. The narrator says:

The Astrologer issued an order the next day authorizing the homeless to carry on living on the spots where they had their homes as though their homes were still there. The As though attitude, his orders said, was fundamental to spiritual civilization like ours, where even kings had Preferred the purity of the forests to the suffocation of palaces. No doubt there would be initial inconvenience but, in the long run, all was bound to work out the best. (37)

Brahma Dutta Sarma, commenting on the use of spiritualism to silence the poor, rightly says:

“Here spiritualism is being used as a narcotic to keep people homeless and reminds one of the religion which, as Karl Marx put it, was made to work as opium”.<sup>7</sup>

Another horrible step taken by the Grand Master to keep him in the seat of power is to take the help of the army and the police to frighten the masses into loyalty. These two forces which are expected to protect the state from external threat and internal revolt are blatantly misused for self-protection. In order to acquire absolute powers, one day the Grand Master proclaims the beginning of a new era called 'The Era of Ultimate Greatness' which is nothing but the declaration of Emergency in the State curtailing all fundamental rights of its citizens. Though the government needs money, its role is quite different from that of a selfish businessman. The novelist satirizes the Grand Master's decrees. The decrees are issued to help the people but their implementation is either postponed or held up forever. This is nothing but cheating the subjects. The greatest tyranny in the novel is that the wrong doer blames the victims even for his repressive measures and their attempts to direct the people's ire towards the dissenters. The novelist attempts to satirize the Grand Master when the latter chooses to blame every boatman for his using police and army against him:

"He forces us to beat him with sticks and fire bullets and lasers into him. He forces us to call out the army". (58)

The novel lashes out at corruption in public life, selfishness of the rulers and the political shenanigans of the cronies. It is interesting to note that the author achieves his goal of delivering his message without giving us psychologically realized characters.”<sup>14</sup> *The City and the River* is clothed in allegorical attire. The novel has archetypal characters in some important roles. But *The City and the River* consists of only archetypes rather than individuals in order to give a mythic proportion to the novel. The novel has nine chapters besides a prologue and an Epilogue.

Thus the story ends where it begins. Thus the full meaning of the city's horoscope is known only to the river. The river and the city, thus stand as two shining allegorical symbols. The novel presents both the apocalyptic and the demoniac spirit in the human world of the unnamed city. The plot of *The City and the River* reveals itself at three distinct levels: the mythic, the primitive and the modern. These three elements are incredibly interwoven into the structure of the novel by Arun Joshi, who

"Creates the measured rhythms of myths, legends and archetypes to make his work realistic despite the absence, of psychologically-realized characters".<sup>16</sup>

If we view the novel from the realistic angle, it is an indictment of the social and political chicanery and at the archetypal level it is a quest for truth. Subhash Chandra rightly remarks;

“Using the strategies of allegory, irony and satire, Joshi dexterously weaves a tale which is a mixture of fantasy and stark realism with a view to communicating the horrors and terror that are unleashed on a society, when a handful of individuals become overtly ambitious and selfish”.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed those who have developed a fancy for the vitality and psychological realism of the earlier novels of Joshi may well feel a tinge of sadness when they peruse the new work. The peregrinations of a philanderer variously depicted having come full circle already, Joshi's attempt to try his hand in a new fictional experiment is perhaps but natural.

Thus this novel, *The City and the River* reflects Arun Joshi's newer path in satire and allegory. "The novel", as R.K. Dhawan puts 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"<sup>18</sup>.

The novelist fails in characterization. The characters do not develop spontaneously. They lack psychological depths. Joshi leaves them as archetypes than developing them into individual characters. However, as Anup Beniwal puts it,

"The novel is a powerful and pungent comment on the political scenario that was, that has been and that shall be. This novel surely claims a pride of place among the political novels of today"<sup>19</sup>.

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