

**ARUN JOSHI'S *THE CITY AND THE RIVER*: HARNESSING THE RIVER
MOTIF FOR UNIVERSAL REDEMPTION**

Dr. Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam
Assistant Professor (English),
GITAM Institute of Management,
GITAM University,
Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

Abstract

Rivers which have always been the life-blood of all great human civilizations and habitations, have also served as rich sources of inspiration to writers in every genre. Right from the Vedas and epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Indian literature has found ample space for rivers. Similar is the case with Indian English literature wherein it is hard to find classics devoid of river motifs. In his last novel *The City and The River* which is a fable of the Indian nation-state, Arun Joshi, the great philosopher-novelist turns from his usual concern with the individual to the destiny of the masses. The novel focuses on the battle between the victimized citizens and the corrupt, power-hungry rulers. The entire novel turns around the clash of two contradictory fulcrums – the City and the River, which may be interpreted as the human and the divine respectively. The novel revolves around the mythical framework of the River as the soul of the nation and the bedrock of civilisation. The River is a metaphor of the divine both within and outside man, the unchanging and immortal entity, the soul or conscience of the nation, the mute witness to, the centre of and the driving force of all life. This conception of the River as a spiritual idea and character in the novel, lends Joshi a potent medium to drive home his philosophy that there can be no future for India in the absence of strong spiritual and ethical foundations in personal and public lives. Just as the City cannot exist without the benevolence of the River, India cannot flourish without soul-force. *The City and the River* is yet another instance of how Indian English literature has elegantly harnessed the metaphor of the river as a means of personal and national redemption.

Rivers which have always been the life-blood of all great human civilizations and habitations, have also served as rich sources of inspiration to writers in every genre. Right from the Vedas and epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Indian literature has found ample space for rivers, which are employed as metaphors, background settings and as central elements in the narrative. The river - witness to wars and partitions, to escapades of lovers and new beginnings of adventurers and traders, appeals to readers of all ages and classes. Writers from

every part of India have created abundant literature centred around the Ganges, Saraswati, Brahmaputra, Yamuna, Godavari, Indus and other great rivers.

Similar is the case with Indian English literature. Whether it is Sarojini Naidu's melodious references to Indian rivers or the vast corpus of Partition literature that uses rivers as historical reference points or the constant metaphor in Dalit literature of the river that is used to reinforce caste divisions, whether it is the very important Sarayu river in R.K.Narayan's *Malgudi* or the river Ganga in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and The Rope* which leads the hero to discover his own self or the use of the River Vaikai by A.K.Ramanujan in his poem *A River* to expose the heartlessness of contemporary India, whether it is the Meenachal in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* or the Teesta in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* or the fictional river Chevathar in David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes*, it is hard to find classics devoid of river motifs.

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) was born in Varanasi to illustrious parents and was educated in India and the U.S.A. An engineer and industrial manager by profession, he wrote five novels - *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) which won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, *The City and The River* (1990) and a collection of short stories titled *The Survivor* (1975). An exceptionally perceptive psychological and philosophical novelist, the keynote of his works is an awareness of man's alienation and anxiety in the modern world.

In his last novel *The City and The River* which is a fable of the Indian nation-state, the great philosopher-novelist turns from his usual concern with the individual to the destiny of the masses. This overtly political allegory and satire focuses on the predicament and quest of not one person but that of the entire country. A mixture of fantasy and prophecy, it has been hailed as a parable of the times. The City is all cities. The River is the mother of cities. The novel focuses on the battle between the victimized citizens and the corrupt, power-hungry rulers. According to Kalyan Chatterjee, *The City and The River* is "an allegory of Indian history and its mythic truth." Gita Hariharan calls the novel "a parable of political society- the endless variations of the relationship between men and power" (qtd. in S. Sharma 104).

The novel begins at its end. The Prologue depicts an old sage named Great Yogeshwara narrating the story of the great City to his disciple - The Nameless One. The great City on the banks of the great River is ruled by a tyrannical Grand Master and a selfish ruling elite who live in great luxury atop the Seven Hills. Next in rank come the docile brick-people living in brick colonies. Lowest of all stand the despised mud-people. The most rebellious of them are the boatmen who bow to the River alone and refuse to salute the Grand Master.

Meanwhile the time draws near for an ancient prophecy to be fulfilled. It states that a new king would rise to rule the City. The conflict between the rulers and the ruled peaks. The Grand Master and his Astrologer announce the draconian Triple Laws. The fearsome Era of Ultimate Greatness is declared. The Grand Master's Council is full of power-hungry sycophants. On the other hand are the revolutionary leaders - Bhumiputra alias Bhoma the young iconoclast teacher of the boatmen, the Professor, the wise old Hermit of the Mountain, and their comrades. Bhoma is declared an enemy of the City and the rulers pursue him ruthlessly. There is fierce confrontation between the hi-tech culture of the Grand Master and the natural ways of the boat-people. The Grand Master also faces opposition from the hitherto docile middle class.

Blinded by ambition and arrogance, the Grand Master plans a complete takeover of the City during the Festival of the River. There is resistance mostly in the form of widespread non-violent civil disobedience. The Grand Master now enforces a 'dragnet' - a cluster of self-

multiplying laws suggesting limitless tyranny. Finally, when the shattered boatmen agree to surrender to the Grand Master, Master Bhoma exhorts them to overcome their fear– *"What does your soul care if a man is powerful and a man commands the guns? Guns cannot kill you, my brothers and sisters.If you choose the death of your soul above the death of your body, then no one...can help you."* (p. 146) Hundreds of rebels are tortured to death in the vast underground prisons. The Grand Master forms a Supreme Council which crowns him as absolute monarch. The Hermit of the Mountain realizes that the end of the City is at hand. Endless rain pours down from the heavens and the waters of the River rise. The bows and arrows of the boatmen are no match for the armoured tanks and laser-guns of the omnipotent state. Their burning bodies are pushed into the River. The King's Son kills Master Bhoma. The last defence of the boatmen falls. The Hermit anoints a child of the boatmen as the next Hermit. A raft rises from the River and carries 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.

Thus, the Great Yogeshwara narrates the moving tale of the City and the River to his disciple - the Nameless One. The Nameless One is the child of the boatmen who had been anointed as the new Hermit of the Mountain before the fall of the City. A new City with a new Grand Master has arisen. The new Hermit is to preach to this new City, where, as before, the rulers clash with the ruled. The novel closes with Yogeshwara exhorting the new Hermit to keep striving for the victory of good – *"....The question is not of success or failure; the question is of trying....."* (p.263)

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* is basically a satire on the National Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi government in India during 1975-1977, when democracy was briefly suspended. Yet it goes beyond to a universal perspective as the novelist philosophically interprets the destiny of India. The novel offers a microcosm of India where corruption has eroded the government machinery. 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, there are also forces which fight for democracy and justice.

The City and The River stands out for its spiritual view of statecraft. From the prologue which suggests the virtues essential for leaders, to the soul-dead government functionaries, the varied responses of the masses to despotism, and the Hermit of the Mountain and Master Bhoma who preach truth and justice, there is one central theme in the novel – spirituality versus materialism. The novelist castigates a nation which has changed its priorities and forgotten its rich heritage and noble ethos. Ultimately, the novelist suggests that the conflict between good and evil is a universal existential problem. Suffering and decay are the destiny of mankind. However, the novel advocates spiritual consciousness and negation of self for personal and national redemption. The question is not of individual success or failure but of collective efforts for the common good. Until that is achieved, corruption, poverty, violence and misery would continue and no system of governance would prove infallible.

The entire novel turns on two contradictory fulcrums – the City and the River. The plot is sustained by the clash between these two powerful symbols or metaphors which may be interpreted as the human and the divine respectively. However, a closer look reveals that the City and the River are closely intertwined, almost inseparable. All the glory and might of Indian mythology are employed by Arun Joshi in his creation of the River. In India rivers have traditionally been symbols of life and Joshi aptly invests his River with both human and divine

attributes. The River at one level is inanimate, silent, the server of the city, spectator of all the ultra-modern, hi-tech inventions and luxuries of the rich and the suffering of the poor. At another level, it is a representative of God, the Mother who gives birth to and sustains the City. The boat-people or the masses look upon the River both as their mother and as God. The “silent” voice of the River is the voice of the Almighty. It is the River which inspires and teaches men to revolt against the evil and falsehood of the rulers. In fact it is only the righteous like Bhoma or the Professor who can hear the voice of the River as they approach her banks laden with existential burdens - “*The river flowed by, quietly murmuring, saying things to those who understood her.*” (p.29) They love the River and swear allegiance to her alone. Ultimately it is the River that bears away to paradise her martyred children and then metes out poetic justice by wreaking havoc on the evil-doers and consuming all of them mercilessly. The old City is destroyed and it is only when the waters of the River recede that a new City can be born again. Again, it is the same River which safeguards the child of the righteous who is entrusted with the task of preaching goodness to the new City. The City (symbolic of humanity at large) has no existence apart from the River; both the horoscope and the prophecies relating to the destiny of the City are centred around the River. “*The river, I see, from a teacher rise*” reads the prophecy about the fall of the City. The rulers misinterpret it, and kill the teacher Bhoma, thus paving the way for the River to rise in anger from his ashes. The rulers of the City initiate their own ruin when they start disregarding the significance of the River and pay little heed to the voices of the righteous children of the River. The novel revolves around the mythical framework of the River as the soul of the nation and the bedrock of civilisation. Like the river in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* or the Ganges in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, it is a witness to human history, enlightening and purifying the human soul, a symbol of eternity or divinity. The River covering the City resembles the Biblical floods which destroyed the sinful world. Thus the River is a metaphor of the divine both within and outside man, the unchanging and immortal entity, the soul or conscience of the nation, the mute witness to, the centre of and the driving force of all life. This conception of the River as a spiritual idea and character in the novel, lends Joshi a potent medium to drive home his philosophy that there can be no future for India in the absence of strong spiritual and ethical foundations in personal and public lives. Just as the City cannot exist without the benevolence of the River, India cannot flourish without soul-force.

Joshi's attempt to make spirituality the foundation of national life echoes Gandhian philosophy. Renowned political scientist Rajni Kothari writes that Indian democracy faces a crisis of values. Soon after independence, the example of the founding fathers guided the polity. But over the years, in the absence of a larger ethical code, politics degenerated into a cold and cynical exercise in control and manipulation, resulting in its takeover by musclemen and mafias. Gandhi was right that politics and religion are closely intertwined. Either the state is an instrument of morality or it is made into an instrument of some positivist force, be it progress or national glory or individual glory. Whenever the state is shorn of the moral imperative and the nuances and controls that go with it, it becomes totalitarian - no matter what its legal constitution may be (Kothari 125 - 127).

The City and the River reveals a cosmic vision of human life and offers a panacea to the crisis in personal and national life. It predicts the possibilities of the post-modern nation-state and prepares the citizen to face these challenges and establish a just, humane, progressive state. *The City and the River* is yet another instance of how Indian English literature has elegantly harnessed the metaphor of the river as a means of personal and national redemption.

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