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POWER POLITICS IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE CITY AND THE RIVER*

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Abstract

Indian fiction in English has acquired a prestigious position in World literature and has emerged as a separate entity for the study of the rapid change and development in social, economic, political and psychological facets of Indian Society. The literary stature of Indian novel in English has steadily grown with each successive work of fiction. The creative impulse of the novelists has touched the beats of the time and presented it on their canvases. With the growing passage of time, Indian-English fiction too moved and came with new themes and thoughts. The post –independence fiction concerned itself with exploring the significance of India for mankind and with the problems that man faces in the twentieth century – tradition and progress, individual and family, spiritual faith and material progress. It mainly concentrated on the problems of man with all its varied experiences. With Arun Joshi, Indian English fiction made a new flight to catch up with the issues of modern time. Joshi's fifth and last novel *The City and The River* published in 1990 is a political parable. The singularity of this novel consists in its being a departure from as well as a continuation of Joshi's earlier fictional endeavours. It strikes an entirely different theme from the earlier novels of Joshi. 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 presents a critique on the political scenario of the time. Arun Joshi deviates from his earlier themes of alienation, identity crisis and other issues related to individuals with which he has dealt in his previous novels. He moves to a different world concerning universal and political crisis of the society and humanity. It is a tale of power struggle of politics which is relevant in all times.

Keywords

Arun Joshi, *The City and The River*, Political Parable, Universal Crisis, Spower Struggle, Indian English Fiction.

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The City and The River, the last novel of Arun Joshi deals with the theme of power struggle that is recurrent in all times. In this novel, Joshi focuses on the authenticity in the lives of individuals who are caught in the flux of complicated business of living. The political scenario is the backdrop and an active agent in the story, making the question of authenticity acquire significance in the lives of both the people and the city. The novel explores the relevance of God to man and affirms that "The world indeed belongs to God and to no one else." The belief in God restores peace to human soul. An unqualified surrender to His will is the only solution to life's problems. The novel presents a critique on the political scenario of the times and depicts the crisis of the society and humanity. It is a tale of modern politics, corruption and greed for power.

The novel starts with an impressive prologue with an introduction of a devout disciple and his teacher, "the Great Yogeswara". The Nameless one, the 30 year old disciple, has spent most of his life learning the ancient tongue that no one understands from Yogeswara. He taught the Nameless one the secret of the body and spirit and showed him how the spirit gains control over the body. He thus led him to two kinds of thought. To reveal the true identity and to tell who he (The nameless one) was, the Great Yogeswara embark on a "strange sorry tale." (10)

The story is set in a city by the river governed by the Grand Master "the son and Grandson of Grand Masters" (13) He has grown up in the place where his family has lived for 70 years. Grand Master as a ruler visits his subjects but is never concerned with their problems and has never attempted to familiarize with them. He believes that he loves the city and the people but is not certain. He is doubtful regarding their fidelity towards him.

Grand Master tries to improve his governing power by establishing various sets of organizing boards. To improve his rule further, he has set up a council known as the Council of the Friends of the people or the Advisory Council. The council is made up of the Palace Astrologer, the Minister for Trade, the Education Advisor, the Police Commissioner and the Master of Rallies.

He categorises the people as per their behavioral attitudes. Of all the people he considers the boatmen to be the most unreasonable, whereas the bricks people could be distracted and even threatened accordingly him. Moreover they belong to the minority group. All other people including the mud people could be persuaded but the boatmen are both stubborn and rebellious.

Once the Great man dreams of becoming a king, enthroned on top of a hill surrounded by waters of river. The Astrologer interprets the dream as a warning of the rebellion of the people. This interpretation of Grand Master's dream strengthens his bickering towards the boatmen. The boatmen pose a threat to the King and his throne. They formed the opposition group. Their strength and number posed a danger both to the City and Palace as Astrologer says : "The danger posed by their numbers is not only to the city but also to the palace itself. As their number grow so does their discontent and so much easier does it become for the spark of rebellion to ignite." (16)

The Grand Master is filled with contempt for the boatmen and is disgusted at their ugliness and nakedness but he knows that without their support he would not be able to continue with his reign. So he sends the Astrologer as his mediator who speaks on behalf of him. On the bank of the River, the Astrologer addresses the public: "My children, God has sent the Grand Master to be your servant. Looking after the city is like 'yajna' for him and his life the 'ahuti'" (17). He indirectly hints about the increasing treachery and rebellions behaviour among the people when he says "A large number of 'asuras' have taken human form and have descended to disturb the 'yaina.'" (17)

The Astrologer thus bestows the message of the Triple ways to the people and a new era called "the Era of Ultimate Greatness" is officially declared. He, very tactfully tries to seek obeisance of the people for the Grand Master by addressing him as the father and mother of the city and the people or citizens as his children. To control the increasing number of opposition group of people like boatmen, a strategy of having only 2 children in a home was set up. The people were pleased by the big and high sounding words of the Astrologer and he gets successful in confusing them.

The New Era was inaugurated by the arrest of a boatman and a clown as boatman's wife had delivered an illegal child. The clown was arrested because he had been heard to laugh when an old man was put in chains. The clown laughed because he remembered how the boatmen got moved to tears by the speech of the Astrologer. The decree regarding the Era of Ultimate Greatness came of them as a surprise and filled them with fear and foreboding. The Grand Master's intention of becoming the unchallenged king of the city is soiled by his over ambitions councilors but is challenged by young people like Bhumi Putra (the son of the soil) and the rebellion of the boatmen who owe their allegiance only to the river and to no one else. Boatmen are the representatives of their native rootedness.

The headman (lady chief) and her people rejects Grand Master's ideas which stirs the wrath of police force and its harsh application of bringing peace in the city. In that city, there were two young men by the name of Bhumi Putra who is a teacher but a rebel and Dharma Vira, a police officer, who is known for obedience and perfect adherence to duty. It is believed that Bhumi Putra instigated the brains of the boatmen and other people with the ideas of rebellion. So as per the New Era regulations, Dharma proceeds to arrest Bhumi Putra's neighbour, an old man by the name of Patanjali. It is so necessitated as Bhumi Putra was absconding and Patanjali was arrested only as a

substitute for him. Being a thin old man the handcuffs could not stay on his wrist and kept slipping off. DharamVira asks the old man to apologize if he wants to be free, but he does not agree to it. He retorts “Why should I apologize? I have done no wrong. Rather the Grand Master should apologize for making such absurd rules. (26) He is ready to go to jail but greatly wishes that someone must make the Grand Master aware of the rules, which he himself does not know.

The old man’s concern for the future of the city foretells its doom and he warns Dharma and says : “I am not saying it will be secured at once but in time the great river will throw up many Patanjalis, and when the Grand Master’s jails are full, then yes, then. (27)”

The Teacher and the students though fell under the jurisdiction of the Education Advisor, but they were loyal to Bhumiputra who is popularly known as Master Bhoma, a teacher of Mathematics. Though he is arrested, he manages to escape. Bhumiputra’s disappearance causes great tensions among his family as well as the government. His sister seeks the help of Dharma’s uncle who is known by all as the professor. The Professor is not aware of the Astrologer’s Three Truths and the Era of Ultimate Greatness. He is busy tracking the galaxies that swing back and forth in the majestic indigo sky over the great city and the great ancient river.

The Professor teaches Astronomy and Bhoma was one of those few city youths whom he had taught Astronomy. Professor remembered him well as Bhoma was too sincerely studied what he taught. So Bhumiputra becomes his only aim. But even after strenuous hint he does not trace Bhumiputra rather he is arrested in turn for supporting Bhoma, along with the Headman who refuses to swear allegiance to the Grand Master. Both are condemned to the Gold Mines, which stood for the city jails.

Many attempts are made to destroy the boatman’s way of life. The boatmen gathers on the river and pray and sing in the ancient tongue to Lord Varuna. The Grand Master has an intense dislike for music. He fails to recollect where he heard the music, so he gets dissatisfied with himself. He gives orders to the Commissioner to destroy the musical instruments with laser Guns. The destruction of their instruments takes the boatmen by surprise and their song in ancient tongue comes to a stop. As a curse of the boatmen and other people, the city is wiped out by the deluge. It rained without stop for seven days and seven nights.

On the eighth day, the sun rises and from a clear sky a new dawn appears at a vast sea of water. The sea was calm and had no hint of the agitation that had gone into its making of the Grand Master and his city nothing remained. Thus, it was a new beginning and the end of the dictatorship of the Grand Master.

The Nameless one ponders over the sad fate of the city and wonders whether the ruins of the city prevailed there still. The Great Yogeswara enlightens him regarding the cyclic march of humanity and the continuing process of death and rebirth. A new city is born on the ruins of the old city. The Grand Master or the new king appears on the scene more equipped than before. The weapon, transports everything is better than the old city but yet the conflict remains the same.

The Yogeswara reflects on the irrelevance and meaninglessness of life. On the ruins of the city, as always happens, a new city rises. It is ruled by another Grand Master. In the new city, there is another Professor, another Bhumiputra and another tribe of boatmen. There is also another Council and another set of Councilors. The men

have other names but the force 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. "To someone this replay, this repetition of things, might appear as a charade, a joke. But, then whoever said the good Lord did not have humour." (262)

This continuity of humanity and existence bestowed a new meaning to life without which human activities would become futile and meaningless. As per the Great Yogeswara the only way to present the periodic disintegration is by achieving purity which could be obtained only through sacrifice. But in this meaningless and sterile world, men never try to understand the warnings of nature, he is grossly egoistic and violates all natural laws, which brings about his doom.

The city could be saved from destruction if, "the Grand Master had set his ego aside for a moment and read the boatmen's appraising in the right way, the wheels of sacrifice might have move further." (263) The headman of the boatmen had once declared to the Astrologer "It is the boatmen's blood down the ages that has saved the city from annihilation. There is nothing here the Grand Master need teach us." (21)

Through the novel, Arun Joshi affirms that "the world indeed belongs to God and to no one else and He is the noblest thing each of us can imagine." (70) Man attains peace through his faith in God, therefore there is "always room for hope." (236)

The novel indirectly pictures the events of the emergency regime in India and the malpractices resorted to by the political powers of the time. In the novel, the Grand Master and his subordinates employ malpractice in order to raise himself to the apex of the ruling powers. He has the Rallies Master who organizes rallies in his support to give the impression that he is loved by his subjects and he makes the Master of Trade who proposes that the Grand Master be made the king and that it is according to the interest of the people.

During the meeting of the supreme council the Master of Trade puts forward certain criteria that the king of the city should meet in the following words:

First as already decided, he must be a wearer of the sacred thread. Second he must come from a family which has already demonstrated its willingness to make sacrifice for the city. Third he must command the affection of the masses and the trust of the armed forces and the business class. Fourth he should be above petty squabbles of the bazaar. Now gentlemen, the only person who meets criteria is our beloved Grand Master. (213)

Apart from making the rallies, Grand Master organize rallies for himself. He organizes rallies for his son also who will, in future, succeed him. He intends to make his son the Crown Prince under the pretension that he is obliging the country by accepting the power. The Minister of Trade Comments;

The Astrologer stands up before the citizens and make them swear allegiance to the man at the point of the gun. At one go every traditions of the city is abandoned. But even that does not satisfy the Grand Master. He must crown the son as well, make him heir apparent above the heads of all of us, put him on the advisory and in the days to come train him for a thousand mischief." (111)

Another malpractice, resorted to in the novel is to show the Grand Master as a majestic and Godly figure in the eyes of the people. The boatmen refused to bow down

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and swear allegiance to the Grand Master. But the Astrologer's cajole turns them into believing that they are the children of the Grand Master and that he is their protector and provider. Moreover he even says that "Grand Master is His deputy on earth" (19). Yet the boatmen and their Headman refuse to accept the conditions placed before them. The Astrologer says to the headman. "All I ask is that you also swear to the Grand Master. He and the great river are one." (164) Thus, an attempt is made to regard the Grand Master as the Nation and State. And those who do not yield to this declaration were arrested, put in the dungeon and later put to death.

Arun Joshi satirizes the way in which the political leaders struggle and make use of all the wrong means in order to guard their seat of power and position through this novel. He pictures the malpractices employed by the Grand Master for the safe keeping of his power by taking the aid of guns, lacer weapons, police and Army, the defense force which is meant to protect the state from external and internal onslaught, the Grand Master uses it to protect himself from dissenters. The harsh method of gun firing is adapted to disperse the striking boat workers. Two hundred men are cruelly mutilated with machine gun and their dead bodies are dumped into the river. But the morning newspaper presents it in a different way as:

A brief dispatch on an inside page reports that the sit-in at the "Great River Boats" had at last ended. The striking workers had peacefully dispersed and proceeded to their houses. The owners had informed the visiting relatives that there was no point in looking them at the boat works since the workers had already left for their homes. (185)

The Grand Master continues with his atrocity by harassing his opposition party, the boatmen, who are causing him maximum inconveniences mentally and physically. The unity and strength in large number threatens him so he makes all attempts to break their unity by destroying everything which is dear to them.

Through this novel, Joshi vividly portrays the malpractice of appointing persons in higher, responsible and authoritative posts only for political reasons without taking into account their talents and capabilities. The novel gives ample evidence of their malpractices. A man is elected as the Education Advisor not because of his capabilities but because he has the support of the students and teachers. The Grand Master wants his support to win the support of the people. The Professor's puzzle as to how such a man got into the Advisory council is answered by the little boy; "It was simple. When the Grand Master inaugurated the New Era the Astrologer advises him to appoint the Education Advisor to the council. That was the only way of keeping his stock – bridges from joining hands with the boatmen." (35-36)s

The novel also gives evidences where the public funds are used by the people in power for their personal benefits and to gratify the whims and fancies of their family members. The Grand Master gets the road called Avenue Great River straightened, as his wife wanted it so. He instructs the Town Planner. "The avenue turns and twists too much, would it not be wonderful to have a road that went straight from the Seven Hills to the very edges of the river." (37)

In attempt to straighten the road, many people lost their heart but the Grand Master and his men turn a deaf ear to their cries and pleas. It is symbolic that the powerful has the right to do anything and their tyranny goes on unquestioned. Another evil presented in the novel is to restrict the freedom of the press and not letting any

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independent news paper to flourish. The newspapers are under the control of the head of the State and the news in the News Papers and the radio is according to what they dictated. Moreover no news is reported against the persons in power. The novelist's satire on the Press and its limitations are presented through the world of the Little Star :

There are two news papers in this city. One of them is owned by the trust of which the Astrologer is the head. A girl owns the other. The girl is five year old and cannot manage a newspaper. The Master of Rallies manages it for her. The Master of Rallies also control the satellite. The Satellite controls the radio and the video. The Master of Rallies control the satellite on the Grand Master's behalf because the satellite is the property of the Grand Master. (88)

As the news paper, the satellite and the lottery stalls belong to the Grand Master directly or indirectly all the news which is received by the people is as per his vision, thus accepting fictions as facts. Another malpractice resorted to by the Grand Master is to discourage the dissenters and to break their spirits. A drastic step is taken to suppress the antagonism of the opposition party by arresting the Headman the lady chief of the boatmen and blinding her as she disagreed to pay allegiance to the Grand Master.

The conflict between the men in power and the public develops into symbolic and ironic incidents which are thought provoking. Finally, the whole thing is dissolved into a mighty deluge. When the evils on the earth increase beyond limit, God controls it in the form of complete collapse or deluge. The tyranny of the Grand Master had become destructive and unbearable and the only means to end his tyranny was to destroy him along with the ill fated city as it happens in the last. But the cyclic march of humanity continues and a new city springs up on the ruins of the old city with a new Grand Master and thus the history repeats.

Through the novel, *The City and The River* Arun Joshi has presented powerful comments and satire on the political scenario that had been in the past that is present now and if the situations exist the same, it will be in future too until drastic changes occur in the nation.

In this novel Joshi shifts from the individual's problems to the community, from the personal confusion and search for self to political disorder and tyranny by the powerful authorities, from self awareness to the political freedom of the Country . Here, he satirizes the practices of the dictators to acquire power under the pretext of public demand and public interest. It is also a satire on the common Indian people, their credulity and blind belief in astrology. The Astrologer even identifies the Grand Mother with the River as he says : "He and the great river are one." (164)

Joshi depicts all type of malpractices, corruption, jailing and killing in the name of people and their safety and presents a very comprehensive picture of the post Independence time. At the end of the story told by the great Yogeswara to the Nameless one the last one with him, about the City and the River and the disintegration of The City under the tyrannical rule, Joshi symbolically talks about the repetition of history and warns against it. In this novel, he moves to a different world concerning universal and political crisis of the society and humanity. The novel is a tale of power struggle of politics which is relevant in all times. It is the picture of modern politics, corruption and greed for power along with the quest to establish identity in the world of conflicts

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between the higher authoritative and the lower and exploited community. This novel is a commentary on the times and reverberates the theme of public and political issues.

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