



Doctrine of Spiritual Regeneration in Arun Joshi's *The City and the River*

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Abstract

The City and the River is a political allegory, marked by a power-struggle and intrigues by the ruling clique. The city is a symbol of tyranny and the River is a symbol of regeneration. A conflict between manipulative ideology and instinctive faith. It suggests a new life after death, provided there is a reawakening of man's spiritual energies and a reaffirmation of faith in God.

Key words: political allegory, power struggle, decay and regeneration

Arun Joshi's novel *The City and the River* is an overtly political allegory and satire which is concerned with the plight and quest of not one individual but that of the entire country. A mixture of fantasy and prophecy, it is a fable of the age-old battle between the exploited subjects and the corrupt rulers, through a well-worked portrayal of selfishness and corruption in the seat of power. The main plot of 'The City and the River' is replete with a power-struggle, manipulations and intrigues on the part of the ruler and his coterie with the purpose of concentrating all centres of authority under them. Around this simplistic structure are woven more intense observations and phenomena; the spiritual forces of creation, the reunion of Nature with man in his distress, the cosmic pattern of evolution and the emblematic recurrence of the myth of decay and regeneration.

The novel starts at its conclusion. The Prologue portrays an old sage, Great Yogeshwara dispatching his youthful disciple called The Nameless One to the great City as an educator. The Yogeshwara narrates the story of the great City to The Nameless One. The great 'City' which is an imaginary and symbolic land on the banks of the

great River, is ruled by a despotic Grand-Master who is one in a line of hereditary Grand-Masters. He resides in a white-domed palace located on the scenic Seven Hills. The majestic mansions and offices of the self-seeking ruling elite are also there in close vicinity. Next in rank come the submissive natured brick-people living in the brick colonies. The abhorred mud-people stand lowest in the hierarchy. The most defiant of them are the boatmen who bow to the River alone and decline to pay obeisance to the Grand Master.

Acting on the cue from a prophecy about the advent of a king, the Grand-Master issues a quashing decree whereby the allegiance of the subjects to 'The Three Beatitudes' is made compulsory. The ego and ambition of the Grand-Master is attempted to be hidden under the pretext of ushering in a welfare state, the era of Ultimate Greatness. These Beatitudes or rules which are designed to eliminate dissent are presumptuous enough to attempt imposition on even the private life of the subject by issuing the order 'Let their numbers be frozen by law (pg.16). This population control measure is not for the welfare of the state and people but only to restrict the growth of

opposing forces. These Beatitudes are insulting and ridiculous, grounded on irrational governance. These rules are reminiscent of George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' where we come across the dictatorial seven commandments made by the leaders for clamping down on the weaker sections. It is just by chance that the Astrologer, who is the advisor of the King and the de facto ruler of the state, and the Hermit of the Mountain, who identifies himself with the river and is the spiritual guide of the river-people, are both disciples of the same teacher, the Great Yogeshwar. It is the conditioning of their minds and the consequent choices they make that turns them into adversaries. The boatmen are able to see through the deceptiveness of the Grand-Master and refuse to comply with the tyrannical rules and orders. This difference in the motives and aims of the ruling and ruled results in the central conflict of the novel. This conflict is on more than one level it is a conflict between the city a symbol of tyranny and the River - a symbol of regeneration. It is also a conflict between the manipulative ideology of which the Grand-Master is a symbol and the instinctive faith which the boatmen profess. The struggle is between the urge to dominate which is perpetrated in a sequence of oppressive and bewildering acts by the ruler and the urge to assert one's identity which is reflected in the refusal of the ruled to shift their allegiance from God to Man. In a figurative sense, it is the estrangement of the city from the river that leads to the ultimate death and destruction of its citizens. All the hostility and antagonism lead to the final submersion in the agitated waters of the great River.

According to the noted critic, Anjita Singh, "The chilling and graphic details of political arrests state sponsored terrorism, torture in custody and warfare using the latest scientific know-how bring to mind numerous such cases in the history of the world which have only resulted in annihilations and destruction of the welfare state. An unrestrained wave of corruption, hypocrisy and sordid manipulation is unleashed till this violation of civic norms and human rights is dissolved into a mighty deluge and resolved. With gripping semblance to reality, the novelist exposes innumerable kinds of malpractices, all tricks of the trade adopted by the

tyrant to establish and sustain his grip over the subject. Particularly ingenious is the manner in which the freedom of the press is checked" (*The Inside*, pg. 47-48). With fine sarcasm that is subtle yet unflinching Joshi the novelist writes-

There are two newspapers in this city. One of them is owned by a trust of which the Astrologer is the head, the other is owned by a girl. The girl is five years old and cannot manage a newspaper. It is managed for her by the Master of Rallies. This Master of Rallies also controls the satellite..... (p.88)

The Grand-Master thinks little of getting the Headman, the lady chief of the boatmen blinded to stem the steady growth of resistance in this group. To sum up, there is nothing which the Grand-master does not attempt to compel the allegiance of the subjects to himself.

Such a tragedy could have been averted by the city, if the Grand Master and his aides had given the slightest thought to the defiance of the subjects at the very beginning. Instead, the arrogant Grand-Master defiles the Festival of the River by substituting its worship with a thinly veiled drive to secure the allegiance of the people for himself. This sacrilege is topped by the manipulated publicity in the electronic and print media about the resistance to his exploitation, 'to convince the city of the imminence of troubles' and 'the necessity of a strong hand at the helm' (p.111). All symbols and attempts at protest and defiance of authority are smashed to the ground. The egocentric Grand-Master along with his cohorts such as the Rallies Master, the Commissioner, to name, just two, (all representatives and limbs of a totalitarian system) unleashes a reign of terror on the people. The ministers display petty selfishness and are bent on fostering their own ambition, oblivious or unmindful of the decline of the welfare of the city-state and its people. The public is outraged by the shenanigans of the men in power and this pitches the city headlong into a period of turmoil until there remains nothing but chaos and blood-shed. The open carnage of the boat-men with laser-tanks is the climatic point in the frenzy of the power-hungry ruler. In a show of naked

anger at the unbending resistance of the boatmen, the Grand-Master has laser beams roast the men alive. The boatmen did not understand what this was and were charred – “the look of surprise still on their faces they fell where they stood” (p.227). Equally heinous is the bombing of Grandfather’s house and his beautiful rose garden. This ironically, is the only place in the city where any flower blooms and in which Grandfather nurtures each rose like a child. Cruelties of this nature are the attributes of any authoritarian rule which focuses on brutal and insensitive display of physical force in an attempt to stamp out all resistance.

According to Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam, “Joshi’s attempt to make spirituality the foundation of national life echoes Gandhian philosophy. The philosophy of *The City and The River* seems indispensable for modern India. Renowned political scientist Rajni Kothari writes that Indian democracy has declined because of a crisis of values. In the years immediately after independence, the inspiring example of the founding fathers provided the polity with high moral standards and exemplary leaders. But over the years, in the absence of a larger ethical code, politics degenerated into a cold and cynical exercise in control and manipulation, ultimately resulting in its takeover by musclemen and mafias.” (Arun Joshi’s *The City and the River* – Harnessing Spirituality for National Redemption, *The Quest*)

The contrast offered is between spiritual visionary guidance for progress and the ruler’s incapacity to rise above his self and selfish ambitions. The author is able to give in this novel a panoramic view of the gradual transition of man’s reason which is slowly formed by the natural progress of civilization until superstition seizes upon it and corrupts it, and tyranny degrades and deadens the minds of men under the burden of misery and fear. There is in the novel a replay in miniature of the process by which the whole of mankind is plunged into a numbing darkness, until once again reason and vision walk abroad on the earth from which fanaticism and barbarism had exiled it.

The City and the River, in its severe commentary on destructive and selfish politics,

becomes a paradigm of contemporary power structures bound up in corruption and dwindling spiritual faith. In its implicit theme, it carries the suggestion of a new life after death, spring after winter, provided there is reawakening of man’s spiritual energies and a reaffirmation of faith in the will of God. The vision that is offered is relevant to both individual and nation in the requirement for spiritual reaffirmation and collective responsibility to remain unaffected by the flames of political evils. Joshi’s own vision is an inextricable weaving of the political and the metaphysical. The spiritual and cultural ethos of the novelist makes the Karmic Principle of the Gita the core of the argument and what Joshi advocates is that in abstraction from spiritual truth, politics can only bring death and destruction.

G.S.Amur aptly comments, “*The City and The River* is a parable about human choice between allegiance to God and allegiance to Man or.....between religion and politics..... As an affirmation of India’s wisdom...and the value of the fable as a mode of comprehension it has a unique place in Indian fiction in English” (A New Parable, pg. 152-157). Arun Joshi has used the river as a symbol of the rod of justice which is bound to fall when any individual transgresses the limits of human and moral laws. After the pitched battle between the King’s forces and the boatmen, the river corrects the unequal encounter, which triumphs in the end. The river swells with unrelenting rain and breaking its embankment it turns into “an ancient sea, like the sea that had just condensed on the whirling planet a billion years ago” (257). In its fury, it sweeps away all tokens and emblems of mindless domination. The authoritarian regime ends with the death of all - the mighty as well as the little. In the end, an illegal child of a boatman who escapes the deluge to set up another City in another cycle of history.

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