

Arun Joshi's The City and the River: Binding Spirituality for National Renovation

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Abstract

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) was born in Varanasi to illustrious parents and was educated in India and the U.S.A. He obtained a degree in engineering from Kansas University in 1959 and a master's degree in industrial management from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1960. He also worked briefly in a mental hospital in the U.S. After returning to India in 1962, he had a brilliant career with the Delhi Cloth and General Mills. 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). Arun Joshi has been acclaimed as an exceptionally perceptive psychological and philosophical novelist. The keynote of his works is an awareness of modern man's alienation, rootlessness and anxiety in the industrialized, materialistic world and a quest for truth and fulfillment. He uses literature as a medium to explore and resolve the human existential crisis. He has been influenced by Albert Camus and other existentialists as also by Indian philosophy and spirituality.

Keywords: - Arun Joshi, existentialism, truth, spirituality, nationalism, redemption.

Introduction

In the post-1980 era, several Indian English novelists have tried to project the Indian national experience on the global stage, to bear witness to the merger of personal lives and national histories and, to rewrite national history from the perspective of the marginalized. It is an undeniable fact that the collaboration of the citizens and the government has resulted in proud achievements and tremendous progress for India as a nation-state. At the same time, it is deeply disturbing that this development has still not translated into reality for a vast majority of Indians. There is also a sharp decline in the quality of the Indian polity. This naturally leads to anxiety about the future and the desire for a vision that would lead to a bright future for all the people of India. In this context, the study of Arun Joshi's novel *The City and The River* (1990) which offers a holistic solution for personal and national salvation makes for an interesting analysis.

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* is a fable of the Indian nation-state. It is different from his other novels in that it is an overtly political allegory and satire and focuses on the predicament and quest of not one individual but that of the entire country. A mixture of fantasy and prophecy, it is a parable of the age-old battle between the victimized citizens and the corrupt rulers.

The novel begins at its end. The Prologue depicts an old sage Great Yogeshwara sending his young disciple called The Nameless One to the great City as its teacher. The Yogeshwara narrates the story of the great City to The Nameless One. The great City on the banks of the great River is ruled by a tyrannical Grand Master. He lives in a white-domed palace atop the picturesque Seven Hills. On these hills stand the splendid mansions and offices of the self-seeking ruling elite. 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 about the City 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, - one, all citizens are to owe complete allegiance to the Grand Master; second, to ensure wealth for all, there shall be only one child to a mother; third, those disobeying the Grand Master are to be ruthlessly punished. The fearsome Era of Ultimate Greatness is declared. Police forces are used to intimidate the masses. The Grand Master's Council is full of power-hungry sycophants. On the other hand, are the revolutionary leaders - Bhumi Putra alias Bhoma the young iconoclast teacher of the boatmen, the Professor, the wise old Hermit of the Mountain, and their disciples and comrades. Bhoma is declared an enemy of the City and the rulers pursue him ruthlessly. Amid these growing tensions is set the fierce confrontation between the hi-tech culture of the Grand Master and the natural ways of the boat-people. The Grand Master now faces opposition not only from the poor but also from the hitherto docile middle class. The resistance of the middle class is represented by – Dharma the police officer, Dharma's Grandfather, Dharma's fiancée Shailaja, Shailaja's brother-the mystical revolutionary and Vasu the brave journalist.

After the encounter with his opponents, the Grand Master's insecurities grow. Blinded by ambition and arrogance, he foolishly plans a complete takeover of the City on the day of the Festival of the River. The stunned crowds are terrorized into swearing allegiance to him. The palace Astrologer anoints the Grand Master's son as the heir to his father. The state clamps down fiercely on rebels. There is resistance from the poor and middle-class citizens, mostly in the form

of non-violent civil disobedience. As governmental tyranny reaches its acme, freedom of expression is taken away. The Professor, representative of the intellectual class, thinks of an alternate means to broadcast the truth about the state and the rebel leader Master Bhoma. His initiative named 'The Lottery Stall' is supported by some selfless, fearless citizens. The ingenious Lottery Stall enterprise is crushed, but Bhoma's parable is told among millions and the ruling class is ridiculed. The Grand Master now enforces a 'dragnet' - a cluster of self-multiplying laws suggesting limitless tyranny. Brutality is unleashed upon commoners.

Finally, when the shattered boatmen agree to take the oath of loyalty to the Grand Master, Master Bhoma returns to their aid. He teaches the boatmen about the transience of despots and exhorts them to overcome their fear of the Grand Master – *"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) The final stage of the people's revolt takes birth in the Gold Mines, the vast underground prisons. The Head of the Boatmen, the Professor and thousands of rebels are incarcerated here. The people are shocked as the Head of the Boatmen is blinded and the Professor dies fasting for justice. Despite the inevitable workings of fate, a 'choice' is offered to each individual. While the rebels choose to fight for the Truth, the Grand Master, despite repeated warnings, chooses to become more arrogant. A new Supreme Council is secretly instituted. It crowns the Grand Master as King and the City is transformed into an absolute dynastic dictatorship of the elite. All democratic practices are abolished.

Discussion

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 boatmen are on their own against the omnipotent state. Their bows and arrows are no match for armoured tanks and laser-guns. Their burning bodies are pushed into the River. On the other hand, the rulers deck the City to celebrate the coronation of the Grand Master as King. The King's Son kills Master Bhoma and his confidants. The last defence of the boatmen falls. The Hermit anoints the child of the first boatman to be killed by the King 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. On the eighth day, the sun rises over a boundless ocean. Divine justice is meted out.

Thus, the Great Yogeshwara narrates the moving tale of the City and the River to his disciple - the Nameless One. The Nameless One is none other than the child of the boatmen who had been anointed as the new Hermit of the Mountain before the fall of the City. A child of the poorest, he is divinely ordained to lead mankind to enlightenment. 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. There is always hope that the Grand Masters would repent, that the City would purify itself of its vices through sacrifices. The novel closes with Yogeshwara exhorting the new Hermit to keep striving for the victory of good over evil – "... *The question is not of success or failure; the question is of trying...*" (p.263)

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* not only offers a striking glimpse of the past, present and likely future of the modern Indian nation-state, but also suggests a mature vision for personal and national redemption. It is basically a satire on the National Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi government in India during 1975-1977, when democracy was briefly suspended. Though littered with references to this historical event, it goes beyond the particular to a universal perspective as the novelist philosophically interprets the destinies of the Indian state and its citizens. The novel offers a complete microcosm of India where corruption has eroded the government machinery and the rich and the mighty dominate public life. 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, amid class-divides, tyranny and a hi-tech materialistic culture, the good and the bad, the idealistic and the unprincipled co-exist in every arena. If there is ruthless power-politics, there are also forces of resistance 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 twisted psyche of the rulers, the constant glare of the state over private lives, the soul-dead government functionaries, and the varied responses of the masses to despotism, 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, where the righteous are ostracized and punished, where the middle-classes blinded by narrow interests fail to oppose evil-doers, where greed has possessed people and the state expects its agents to become inhuman.

Amid all this, the Hermit of the Mountain advocates governance based on spirituality. The Hermit, the voice of the Truth, sees the ancient prophecy about the downfall of the City as a

consequence of the vicious pursuit of power. Despite the dark prophecy, he believes that the people of the City have the ultimate power to decide their own destiny. Their actions will determine the final interpretation of the prophecy. The Hermit preaches to both the revolutionaries and the unjust rulers. The unhappy Minister for Trade secretly confesses - *"That is where the rub lies - in action. Where one should raise standards of rebellion, one foolishly seeks compromises. Where one ought to call a spade a spade, one merely stays dumb - and hopes for the best. Where is the cure, Great Hermit?"* (p.69) The Hermit replies that the only cure is Truth. Truth is indispensable, synonymous to God, the Supreme King. It gives wisdom to rule and to choose the right ruler. It is not enough to do one's duty faithfully. One should fulfill one's responsibilities 'truthfully'. However, the practice of Truth demands selflessness and courage - *"An empire of falsehood is created so someone can become king.... The Truth ... is what destroys the falsehood at its very roots, what leaves all men free to choose as they will."* (p. 112) For the rulers, adherence to Truth would mean giving up lust for power, accepting that the law of Nature is supreme and that the City would survive regardless of them. Each man claims to be a better ruler, but the truth is, *"A man aspiring to rule this city must first learn to be the slave of the city."* (p. 113) The Hermit tells the Minister, *"God's hand has placed you above us. Think of us before you think of yourself. You forget there is a Master of the World beyond the Grand Master and the rest."* (p. 114) He cautions that unless rulers follow the ideal of self-sacrifice and heed their conscience, destruction is certain. The Hermit's teachings also inspire the forces fighting for liberty and justice. Master Bhoma, is taught the doctrine of spiritual liberation by the Hermit - *"....nothing enfeebled man more than fear...nothing but fear stood between him and his liberation....where men had thrown off this blanket of fear there alone truth had triumphed and great civilizations flourished and man had taken another step towards God....A moment comes when knowledge must realize itself in action or else become sterile....the truth ennoble both he who preaches and he who listens...it is only truth that can cut the tentacles of the shadow."* (p.155, 156)

Arun Joshi also advocates a vital role for citizens and civil society in resisting tyranny and creating a better national future. It condemns those who remain mute spectators. Fearless, selfless and right action alone can liberate the citizen and defeat despots. In this context, the novel also deals with the conflict between violent and non-violent means of resistance. It hints at the futility of non-violent resistance in the modern nation-state which commands fathomless resources and heartless men. At the same time, the novelist has doubts about violence as a lasting solution.

Thus, *The City and The River* seeks to resurrect the forgotten humane ethos of Indian civilization. As the novelist observes, "*Everyone is thousands and thousands of years old, tied as we are to the wheel of karma. Unfortunately, we forget this. Kings and Grand Masters forget this the most. That is the world's misfortune.*" (p. 42) The novel eloquently and lucidly sets out the fundamentals of the ideal nation, the ideal ruler and the ideal citizen. Moral fibre is upheld as the panacea for all ills of governance. The supremacy of soul force and realization of the true nature of the human soul are dominant themes.

Ultimately, the novelist suggests that the conflict between good and evil is a universal existential problem. The rise and fall of regimes are inevitable. Suffering and decay are the destiny of mankind. However, Arun Joshi uses the ancient prophecy about the City to demonstrate that the individual has the power to decide national destiny. As the Hermit says, "*Cities, my children, even as men, make their own horoscopes.*" (p. 217) Most importantly, Joshi offers a way out of the endless cycle of misery for both the individual and the nation. This is the path of sacrifice. As the Great Yogeshwara says, "*...the city must purify itself if it is not to dissolve again.... Of egoism, selfishness, stupidity...But purity can come only through sacrifice.*" (p.263) 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. Arun Joshi's splendid tale closes with an emphasis on sound moral foundations for nation-states. It affirms human surrender to the Divine as the ultimate solution to existential crises – "*...we are only instruments...of the great God in the highest heaven who is the Master of the Universe. How perfect we are as instruments is all that matters. His is the will, His is the force.*" (p. 264)

Conclusion

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. In the ultimate analysis, 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). R.S. Pathak opines that the means suggested by Arun Joshi to counteract life's meaninglessness have been elaborately described in Indian philosophy and scriptures, but the way he integrates them into his novels is really remarkable. His novels indicate that self-actualisation and salvation is possible only by liberating the self from the clutches of mercenary civilization and listening to the inner being (Pathak139-140). As G.S.Amur writes, "*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" (Amur152-157).

To sum up, *The City and the River* is a tour de force not only because its cyclical structure points to the causes of the endless cycle of human misery, but also because it reveals a cosmic vision of truth and a panacea to the crisis in personal and national life. The novel predicts the possibilities of the post-modern nation-state and prepares the citizen to face these challenges and establish a just, humane, progressive state. A significant and unique political novel, *The City and the River* offers an instance of how Indian English novelists have harnessed Indian sensibility and spirituality to offer ways and means of personal and national redemption.

Works Cited

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