

River Symbolizing as Untamable Force of Nature and Freedom in Arun Joshi's *The City and the River*

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Abstract

River has ever been the vital force of life and sustenance to the land. Life has existed only where river has existed. All the civilizations of the world are grown on the river. It is the bloodline of the entire ecosystem on the Earth. River has ever been the fascinating force and balance of the nature. Man has always been dependent on this force. When there is exploitation by the egoistic and greedy man, then the nature plays its all powerful role to bring balance. *The City and the River* is the fifth and the last novel by Arun Joshi (1939-1993). His style was thematic and unique in subjects which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982. His works reflect a blend of human beings' internal conflicts with that of external forces. *The City and the River* is a powerful allegorical novel that delves into the complexities of power, freedom, and resistance in a dystopian society. This paper explores the imbalance in the city and urban life, the importance of nature's elements. Set in an unnamed city governed by an authoritarian ruler and a sinister dictator known as the Grand Master with his Council of Advisors. The story serves as a metaphor for political systems and human struggles against oppression. The novel was written in 1990 during a period when India saw the turbulence in politics due to the rise of authoritarianism and when there was the erosion of individual freedom.

Keywords :bureaucracy, oppression, exploitation, suffering, urban life, nature

Introduction

Arun Joshi was an Indian writer born in Benaras in 1939 in an academic environment. Arun Joshi studied in Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA and earned his Master's degree. *The City and the River* was written in 1990 which takes place wholly in an imaginary land, is an allegorical tale recounted by a nameless man. It shows the power struggle between politicians and citizens, rich and miserable, law enforcers and law abiders and law and chaos.

The City and the River follows lives of various characters whose fates are connected to the river in different ways- from the wealthy industrialist who profits from polluting the river, to the marginalized communities that rely on it for their livelihoods. Due to industrial pollution and various overuses, every character's livelihood is impacted and subsequent degradation of the river is seen. *The City and the River* is a documentary of ill-use of river water by the consequences of urbanization and industrialization on the environment. Central to the narrative is the river, which functions as both a literal and symbolic element, representing untamable natural forces and the ideal of liberation. Through the interplay between the 'City' and the river, Joshi critiques authoritarianism and celebrates the resilience of the human and natural spirit.

As the story unfolds, the Grand Master's obsession with maintaining power leads to his downfall. The resistance, fueled by the ideals of freedom and the enduring symbolism of the river, ultimately overcomes the oppressive forces of the 'City'. The river's continued flow serves as a testament to the resilience of life and the inevitability of liberation.

The treatment of the river by the Grand Master emphasizes the advent of skepticism in the modern times in contrast to the faith of the boatmen. The river, which is revered by the boatmen as "a symbol of the divine mother", is just a stream of water for the Grand Master (21). He brushes aside the astrologer's pleas and the boatmen's beliefs as a mere superstition. The great river is "Time's consort and Time itself" (61). It is the embodiment of the Eternal Time which destroys the city completely whenever sin and evil dominate the life of its people so that on the ruins of the old city, a new city may rise and develop and its people may have another chance to purify it by purifying themselves. The river is not "life-negating" but "life-enhancing" as it washes away the sins of the city and the cyclic march of the civilization continues.

Joshi was a visionary in his age and as a novelist wrote about man's insuperable dehumanization and erosion of human values. Joshi presents before us a society in which traditional human value system has been almost eroded and in such a society individual feels isolated, helpless and stunted. Joshi's novels reaffirm the validity of human values in life, the absence of which has plunged man into bewilderment and terror. The river, flowing alongside the 'City', plays a pivotal role in the lives of the characters. It serves as a source of inspiration, a means of escape, and a force that challenges the Grand Master's attempts at control. The river's unpredictable

nature contrasts with the rigid order of the regime, symbolizing the possibility of change and renewal.

The novel depicts the atrocities of autocratic rulers on the committed gullible people. It also highlights the contrast between the Grand Master's and Boatmen's outlook and belief towards life. Disturbed by the continuous oppression the boatmen take a vow to go on a strike:

O my mother, I am a nameless boatman of this city of gold. O my mother, I have become the plaything of my oppressor who is blind and who is deaf. Look at me, my mother, my back is broken. And now, with all that is sacred in you and in the kingdom of Varuna, I vow that until my oppressor opens his ears to my lament not a boat, not a leaf, not even a piece of straw shall pass down your sacred waters (178-79).

The regime's efforts to impose order and suppress dissent mirror humanity's futile attempts to dominate the natural world.

The City and the River brings forth the view that the undesired excess of corruption and anarchy in any society ultimately results in the complete destruction of civilization. The river is regarded 'holy' by gullible boatmen and is worshipped whereas for the Grand Master and his team of Councilors, it is just regarded as a stream of water. For seven days and nights it rains continuously, making the water level rise higher and still higher. The unrelenting rain turns the river into "an ancient sea, like the sea that had first condensed on the whirling planet a billion years ago" (257).

The river's periodic floods and its ungovernable course emphasize its raw, untamed energy. It becomes a metaphor for resistance, showing that certain forces—both natural and ideological—cannot be contained. Just as the river carves its own path, it symbolizes the inevitability of change and the persistence of life despite oppression.

The river's flowing water represents freedom, offering an escape from the stifling constraints of the City. For the characters in the novel, particularly the Boatman, the river is a space of liberation, both physical and spiritual. While the City represents control, conformity, and decay, the river embodies renewal, hope, and the possibility of transcending societal boundaries.

The river's ability to chart its own course reflects the novel's underlying theme of individual and collective liberation. It inspires the oppressed citizens to challenge the authoritarian regime, symbolizing the human desire for autonomy and self-expression. By juxtaposing the static, oppressive nature of the City with the dynamic, flowing river, Joshi underscores the contrast between bondage and freedom.

Conclusion

In *The City and the River*, Arun Joshi masterfully uses the river as a powerful symbol to explore the tension between control and freedom. It challenges the authoritarian regime's efforts to dominate, while its symbolism as a source of freedom inspires hope and resilience in the face of oppression. By weaving the river into the fabric of the plot, Joshi not only critiques the tyranny but also celebrates the enduring strength of nature and human will to be free. The river's dual symbolism as an untamable force of nature and a symbol of freedom highlights the interconnectedness of these themes. Its relentless flow is both a reminder of nature's supremacy and a metaphor for the indomitable human spirit. The river's defiance of control mirrors the resistance of the oppressed, while its boundless movement serves as an inspiration for those seeking liberation.

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