



**ARUN JOSHI'S "THE CITY AND THE RIVER":
AN EXISTENTIAL NOVEL**

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi is one of the most qualified existentialists in the canon of Indian English literature. 'The City and the River' is the fifth and the last novel of Arun Joshi. He is the winner of the most prestigious award Sahitya Akademi. His novels are singularized by certain existentialist problems and the resultant anger, agony, psychic quest etc. His novels are strongly influenced by the existential philosophy of Satre, Albert Camus' and Kierkegaard. The researcher's attempt is to explore the elements such as frustration, disintegration, rootlessness, a sense of alienation and existential predicament in 'The City and the River'.

Keywords: *-Frustration, disintegration, rootlessness, a sense of alienation and existential predicament*

Introduction:

Existentialism is the modern philosophic movement. It deals with man's disillusionment and despairs. It is defined as "a tendency to view each man as an isolated being who is cast ignominiously into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent human truth, value or meaning and to represent man's life, as it moves from the nothingness which is both anguished and absurd" (M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 1971:86). It is an existential issue on the absurdity of human life. Through this novel, the author explores existential and hostile world. Existentialism is the essence of the novel. Ramesh Srivastava comments that "Most of Arun Joshi's Hero's are alienated beings".

His fictional world is a revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the question of his existence. In fact, existentialism is a powerful revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and the traditional ways in which early philosopher portrayed man. The exponents of existentialism strongly described man's autonomy, his self assertion, his reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, his exercise of will and freedom, his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of life.



The City and The River: An Existential Novel:

The city that Joshi has designed stands for power structure in the society where there is a struggle between the two classes i.e. powerful and powerless. The City and the River (1990) is a critical study of existentialism of its archetypal characters. Throughout the novel, these characters carry a sense of alienation, loneliness, absurdity and pessimism with them. The novel depicts the existential dilemma of its characters in hostile world but this predicament is replaced by the socio-political crisis of the city, which is a mixture of individuals and can be said to represent the whole humanity.

Dr. Kumar Kiran asserts,

“It is an existentialist commentary on the absurdity of human situation.”

The novel describes the conflict between the Grand Master and the Boatmen. The Grand Master, who rules the City by the river, is determined to become its unchallenged king. His intentions are reinforced by the existence of an old prophecy. He demands the allegiance from the Boatmen. Master Bhoma, (Bhumiputra) and other rebellions of the boatmen stubbornly insists on offering allegiance to the river alone. The image of the novel is central to the novel. The treatment of the river by the Grandmaster emphasizes the advent of skepticism whereas faith by the boatmen. The boatmen consider the river as a symbol of the divine mother and grandmaster thinks it as a stream of water. He considers astrologer's pleas and boatmen's beliefs as a mere superstition. In fact, the great river is the embodiment of the eternal time which destroys the city completely whenever sin and evil dominate the life of its people. Dhawan asserts that “The River is the life enhancing means which washes away the sins of the city and the cyclic march of the civilization continues.” (Dhawan, 1922: 262). The Boatmen's leader, Headman tells that they owe their allegiance.

“We have no quarrel with the Grand Master and we have no quarrel with you. If it is a matter of allegiance, our allegiance is only to the river and cannot be shared.” (19). They regard themselves as “children of the great river” (19). They consider the river as a symbol of the divine mother, of god himself. (22) Their refusal creates the conflict- the conflict between The City and the River, between the Grand Master and the boatmen, between the urge to dominate and the desire to assert one's identity. This conflict is the life and the soul of the plot. The novel highlights the contrast between the grandmaster'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 play thing of my oppressor, who is blind and who is deaf. 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.” (178-179)

Unnatural and Chaotic City:

The atmosphere of the City is absolutely unnatural and chaotic. The city in the novel is itself rootless and alien to the natural atmosphere. Arun Joshi quotes, "In the city's newly laid parks and along its well-straightened avenues and on the Seven Hills, however, in spite of the chief horticulturist's strenuous efforts, and to the Grand Master's great regret, neither grass nor flowers grow". (136). In this “city of wonders” ,the people, except boatmen, are generally “subdued and not [in] their normal self” (96). There is “nothing to change, no new idea to survive” (55) in the city. In it “nothing was moving in the right direction or, if anything was, it move at a snail’s pace” (55) and hence everyone “was waiting for something to happen” (55). “Chaos is piled upon chaos” (180) is the final impression of the city.. In such a setting, the characters feel their existence rootless, absurd and are in search for something meaningful. Life seems to them as merely “a strange sorry tale” (10) comprising “pointless episodes”.

Existentialistic examples:

1. The master of Rallies:

The Master of Rallies, a child of boatman, is “an unhappy man” (71) and the real cause of his unhappiness is rootlessness. His misfortune lay in the fact that instead of teaching him how to row a boat his parents had wanted him to join the ranks of the brick- people. For fifteen years, they spent all their earning on him. The Master of Rallies was good at studies but after fifteen years when he completed them, like the Education Advisor, he too discovered that no one wanted his services. The boatmen did not have the money to hire him; the brick-people considered him an upstart (71). He appears as “tired” (76), ‘afraid of humiliation” (75) and at “no peace” (76). He says, “I have no family, no wish to get rich. I do not wish to become famous; I have no friends to lose. Am I afraid of going to prison? In fact I (am, but why?). There is no one to mourn me, nor do I have commitments that would suffer”. (75). It accounts his alienation and rootlessness.

2. The Professor:

The professor, a star watcher and a teacher of Master Bhoma, apart from his scholarship is weary and tired “I am tired of being careful ... I am weary” (87). His search for Bhumiputra



“had turned into a search for some lost bit of himself” (159). His quest leads him to imprisonment at Gold Mines. He expresses in disgust: “Forgive me; I have spent my life in sleep. My life has been a joke, even as the lives of brick- people are a joke. I have squandered it on baubles” (163). In extreme sorrow, he expresses “I am lost”. He is crushed by solitudes and weight of human misery. Even Bhumi Putra, a teacher of Mathematics and disciple of professor “felt very alone” (157). He was forced to roam in wilderness, after having the feeling of “wandering through a desert land” (176). He finds the meaning of his life not in escape but in action. He decides to fight with Grand Master. He excites the demoralized boatmen by reminding them that they are children of the sacred river and they should not sell their soul to a man however powerful he may be. But soon, “A sense of overwhelming futility filled him at such times, so much so that he saw no point in living” (174). Sometime, he feels “so old and lonely and useless” (150). The case of the Grand Master is not very different. The minister for Trade frankly tells the Grand Master that he is “tired” (203) and that in his “weariness” (203) he lets “his dark thoughts assail” (203) him. The music “disturb” (203) him. He hears “within its notes the echoes of a mocking laugh” (203). The delay in the prophecy’s fulfillment and the growing anger of the people make the headstrong Grand Master impatient. He suffers from a crisis of trust and grows suspicious of his own advisers: “Who is there in the wider world that I can trust?” (57).

3. Dharma’s father:

Dharma’s father is a profiteer who suffers from a strange kind of disease. He feels like crying, yet cannot cry. He stands before mirror and raves. A hole appears in his image reflected in the mirror and he begins to think, that “My insides are rotting. I too am vanishing (133). He is damned to suffer from the “Three Truths Syndrome, stasis of the soul. Atrophy of the brain and locomotor functions” (135). The stiffness of his joints is symptomatic of the hardening of his soul. His condition degenerates each day so much so that “his mind turned blank, [and] his will was reduced to zero” (134). His doctor tells him in good faith: “Exercise your soul” (134) as medical treatment will not cure him. Dharma, a Police Officer, too, feels alienated. When The Grand trader offers him a silver chair to sit on, he finds it “surprisingly uncomfortable” (91) Dharma wonders how a Grand Trade is in league with powerful persons with whom he shares his profits. After knowing it, in his anguish, “For many weeks, he had been having trouble deciding whether he was living in a city that he used to know” (93). Thus the prominent characters in the novel, suffer from existential predicament for different reasons. Sharma rightly says, “They suffer from alienation, weariness, boredom, rootless ness, meaninglessness in their lives” (2003:84). They are tormented by their hollow existence. Joshi is obsessively occupied with the individual’s quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world. Existential conflict in Joshi springs from the self’s craving



for the fulfillment of certain psycho-emotional needs, from the desire to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of listlessness.

Thus the novel comments upon the futile existence of the oppressed class using the element of allegory and fantasy. Joshi reiterates the significance of human values. The novel suggests that the ruin of the city or society can be done if it is lead by selfishness, corruption and evil powers. Joshi skillfully illumined the major concern of existentialism, frustration, disintegration, rootlessness, a sense of alienation, existential predicament and absurdity through this novel.

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