Chapter Four

Dream and Despotism

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is let loosed upon the world
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

Yeats

Arun Joshi’s last novel The City and River is an exposition of the psychology of the ruling class and their sychopant coteries and also the masses. The novelist sets aside the inner turmoil of the individual protagonist and works on a vaster canvas depicting the predicament of a whole generation. The novel explores the very foundations of faith and right action. It is a severe commentary on the times in the 1970s. Parallels may be found between the Emergency regime of 1974-75 in India and the one portrayed in the novel. It is also a political parable revealing the ruthless governing of the city by the Grand Master and his fawning Council of Advisors. On the other hand are people who struggle and suffer immensely to maintain freedom and liberty of spirit. It is a dig on the corruption and malpractices of political leaders, businessmen, the police
and the armed chiefs. The novel shuttles between two worlds – the political and the spiritual. The political theme is materialized through the dream and the vaulting ambition of the Grand Master who is the ruler of the City on Seven Hills. The spiritual theme rests on a parable of human choice between allegiance to God and allegiance to man.

The political scenario of the city is used as the backdrop of the novel which enables Arun Joshi in presenting the contemporary problems in the metaphysical overview of creation and disintegration. The story proper is prefixed with an impressive prologue which introduces the readers to a devout disciple “The Nameless One” and his teacher, “the Great Yogeshwara” who embarks on “a strange story tale” (*City* 10). The whole story revolves round the dream of the Grand Master who is desirous of becoming the unopposed king of the city. To sit “on a throne on top of a hill surrounded by the waters of the river” is the ambition of the Grand master (*City* 14). The dream does not make him happy because he sees a bizarre world of naked men cropping up from the river and try to usurp his throne. Baffled and perplexed, the Grand Master rises from his seat and in a commanding voice utters to the usurpers, “Go away. This Hill is mine. Go back to where you came from” (*City* 15). But they are indifferent and slight the command of the king and continue to climb the throne. They come very close to the throne, almost choking the king and he even feels their breath on his face. One last time he cries aloud, “This hill is mine”
(City 15). Suddenly he wakes up bathed in sweat. This dream psychologically brings out the all embracing unconscious and latent desires of human mind. Blum reveals the efficacy of dreams so far as the unconscious motives of human psyche is concerned:

Dreams are shown to represent in disguised fashion, the wish fulfilling expression of unconscious, unacceptable thought . . . . Even anxiety filled dreams are said to serve an adaptive function since they reduce inner tension by permitting limited discharge of the anxiety. (56)

To Foucault dream is the “parent of imagination” (25). According to Freud, “Dreams form one small section of symbolism” (Interpretation 8) and Foucault seconds this opinion when he comments that “dream becomes the meaning of the unconscious” (25). Therefore one can agree with Freud when he says:

A powerful symbol from a dream can lead the individual into the wider and richer field of symbolism in everyday, waking life, where the imagination is always at work whether we are conscious of it or not. In the same way, a particular myth or tale which exerts a special fascination may be a way of opening up the symbolic dimension of an individual life . . . (8)
Freud quotes Haffner’s view and explains the significance of dreams in the individual waking life thus:

In the first place, dreams carry on waking life. Our dreams regularly attach themselves to the ideas that have been in our consciousness shortly before. Accurate observation will almost always find a thread which connects a dream with the experiences of the previous days. (65)

In another essay “Creative writers and Day Dreaming” Freud remarks, “our dreams at night are nothing else than fantasies . . . in which the wish makes use of an occasion in the present to construct, on the pattern of the past, a picture of the future” (39). According to Jung “A dream never says: ‘you ought’ or : ‘This is the truth.’ It presents an image in much the same way as nature allows a plant to grow and we must draw our own conclusions” (187). To become an unopposed king of the city on Seven Hills is the ambition of the Grand Master. Days in and days out, he is obsessed with the thought of becoming the King of the city. This ambition of becoming the king gets reflected in his dream.

“Despotism” is a form of government in which a single entity rules with absolute power. That entity may be an individual as in autocracy or it may be a group as in oligarchy. The word “Despot” is derived from the Greek word “despotes” which roughly means “master” or one with power and it was used to describe “the unlimited power” and “authority of the
Pharaohs of Egypt”. “Despot” has different shades of meaning and interpretations at various times in history. Despot is similar to other Greek titles “Basileus” and “Autokrator” Colloquially “despot” has been applied pejoratively to a person, particularly a head of state or government who abuses his power and authority to oppress his people, subjects or subordinates. “In this sense it is similar to the term “tyrant” or “dictator”. Moreover “despot” tends to stress “cruelty, harness or unfair implication of law”. The term now implies “tyrannical rule” or “absolutism” or “dictatorship”. (Encyclopaedia). In this chapter the term “despotism” refers to the ruler of a City on Seven Hills who is an absolute dictator, neither restricted by a constitution nor by laws or opposition.

The Grand Master has a power-conscious psyche which drives him to think about his future. In order to become the sole ruler of the City, the Grand Master has to burn up opposition. After dreaming of becoming the King of the city, he asks the Astrologer to give an interpretation for his dream. The Astrologer, an yesman of the king, finds the dream in conformity with the prophecy that speaks of the coming of a king. In order to wield power, the Grand Master takes recourse to varieties of political malpractices which include the official control over the media, the suppression of dissent by foul means, black-marketing and profiteering, raising of the prices of essential commodities and even smuggling.
The social stratification of the city is signified by the two contrary groups in Seven Hills, the elites of the administration and the mud huts populace. The city has seven hills and people live on them according to their social status and profession which determine the geographical locations given to them on those hills. The elite of the Seven Hills consists of the Grand Master, the Astrologer, the Minister of Trade and other Councillors. The Grand Master lives on the highest hill whereas the ministers occupy the other hills according to their positions. The Councillors of the Grand Master are the Minister of Trade, the Education Advisor, the Master of Rallies, the Astrologer, the Commissioner of Police, the Commander of the Army and General Starch and they occupy the hill according to their position. The middle class people live on a lower ground in pink buildings. The mud huts populace includes the common men like Bhumiputra commonly known as Master Bhoma, the Professor, the Hermit, the Head Boatman, Dharma and other boatmen. The poor people including the boatmen live in an area along the river bank which is the lowest in height. “As the inhabitants of mud huts, the boatmen can be called in modern political terminology as Dalits” (Budholia 28). “The City is obviously contemporary because it is divided in so many classes and social stratifications. This kind of class division gives birth to political trickery and the resultant conflict spoils the very health of the city” (V. Dwivedi 124).
The Grand Master is desirous of being an unopposed king of the city and so he sketches plans in a perfect way to retain and gain power and also to eliminate dissent. To acquire power, the first step is to manipulate people in order to create a general impression that the Grand Master is very popular and is the choice of the people, endeared and adored by them. One of the tactics that the Grand Master uses is to make the Rallies Master organize rallies in his support to give the impression that he is loved by his subjects. He makes the Master of Trade propose in the meeting of the Supreme Council that he be made king for the interest and well being of the people.

As the first step to consolidate his position, the Grand Master with the assistance of the court Astrologer announces “The Way of Three Beatitudes” or “The Triple Way” in front of a large crowd gathered before the palace. His introductory speech with a floral and pompous language is only partly understood by the people. He wants to coax the people thus:

My children, God has sent the Grand Master to be your servant. Looking after this city is like a Yajna for him, his life is the ahuti. . . . A large number of asuras have taken human form and have descended to disturb the Yajna . . . . Anger kills a man, strife a nation. I propose therefore, for your consideration, the Triple Way or The Way of the Three Beatitudes. (17)
“The Way of the Three Beatitudes” declared in an ancient tongue confuses the people. It states:

One, the Grand Master of the city is the father and the mother of the city. All citizens are his children equally. Let them offer their allegiance to the Grand Master as a child to his father.

Two, the wealth of the city belongs to everyone. However, since there are too many of us, let it be resolved that henceforth there shall be one, and only one child to a mother and two to a home.

Three, while happiness and prosperity await the city and all those who follow the Triple Way, for him who chooses the opposite path and prefers to become a milestone round the city’s neck let him be received without mercy and be treated according to the Grand Master’s law of compassionate righteousness. (17-18)

The Astrologer proposes “The Triple Way” only to ensure the allegiance of the people to the Grand Master. “The Astrologer is the arch-designer to convince boatmen to accept the Grand Master as their benevolent servant sent by the gods themselves” (L. Kumar 139-40). But the boatmen as children of the river will never accept this proposal. The boatmen’s leader, the Headman tells the Astrologer, “We have no quarrel
with the Grand Master . . . . It is a matter of allegiance, our allegiance is only to the river and cannot be shared” (*City* 19). This accentuates “the conflict between the city and the river, between the Grand master and the Boatmen” (Sharma 105). The poor boatmen living along the river have “the courage to lead an authentic existence and are prepared to pay whatever price is involved in doing so” (Chandra 268). The Grand Master’s father realizing their potency and courage once cautioned the Grand Master, “they are not simple as they seem. They consider themselves to be children of the river and to the river and river alone do they hold allegiance . . . . And don’t let their poverty mislead you into believing that they can be bought” (*City* 22). The boatmen are ready to face any threat from the Grand Master. The insolent behaviour of the boatmen disgusts the Grand Master. It is only the Headman, the lady leader of the boatmen who understands the plot and design of these endeavours and says, “it had a meaning which was not apparent on the surface” (*City* 18). The lady Headman, a symbol of combing the male and female principles, warns the Astrologer against the dangerous announcements to gull the subjects of the city. Moreover the Astrologer’s sugar-coated speech about the concept of “one child to a mother and two to a home” is ununderstandable by the people. As the Grand Master is worried about the growing population of the boatmen, he wants to freeze it by law or the force of arm if necessary. The Headman argues that
restricting the population is not required in a state which has no dearth of anything. The Headman interrogates:

You think an ant is born on this earth without God’s will? If it is His will that there should be only one child to a mother then surely it shall come to pass. There is no need for the Grand Master or you to pass a law . . . . By the grace of the river and the mountain, rain is made. By the grace of mother earth, a crop is grown. (19-20)

Considering all these belligerent and rebellious attitude of the boatmen led by their leader, the Grand Master clamps upon the city state a new “Era of Ultimate Greatness” which is aimed at disciplining the city and raising the standards of boatmen’s lives. It leaves the people baffled and troubled. The Grand Master takes several steps in order to eliminate the dissenting public. One of his ways to wield power is to use coercion to frighten people into loyalty. A large number of boatmen are sent to prison only because they are disloyal to the Grand Master. The narrator reports, “a decree from the palace announced the beginning of a new era. . . known as The Era of Ultimate Greatness” (City 23). The new era is inaugurated with the arrest of an old boatman whose wife has given birth to an illegal child. In the city more than two children in a family is considered a legal offence. The real reason behind the arrest of an old boatman is as a group the boatmen have voiced a dissent against the Grand Master’s hypocritical
announcement of the beginning of the “Era of Ultimate Greatness”. The clown is arrested on flimsy grounds. Horrors and terrors are unleashed on a society when the ruler and his henchmen become overly ambitious and selfish.

The Grand Master’s delusion to become the unopposed king of the city is checked by the resistance on the part of the commoners. Usually the common people choose to take the non-resistance mode of living. Even if they do not understand the ruler’s order, they remain silent and passive. The announcement made by the Astrologer is vague. The boatmen and the common people do not understand the meaning of the announcement of the Astrologer. “The Astrologer’s speech left the people pleased because they liked big words, but confused . . . . As was their custom when they did not understand something, the people of the city decided to ignore the speech to make believe that it had never been made” (City 18). But the commoners like Bhumiputra, Grandfather, his great-grandson Shani, the Professor, the Headman and Shailaja’s brother in a way or other try their best to resist the steps that the Grand Master is taking in order to gain more power.

Another way to wield power is by threatening the people with the help of police force. The Grand Master gives orders to the police to arrest the people who deny allegiance to him. People are left with the loss of individual freedom resulting in the arbitrary arrests by which innocent
people are condemned to a debased life of suffering and agony in a big underground passage which leads to the complete destruction of the soul. The Commissioner summons a meeting of the officers whose new task is to arrest the people whose names are in a black card. The arrested are taken to a prison which is euphemistically called the Gold Mines. One night Dharma Vira, a police officer who works under the Commissioner is given a black card to arrest Bhumiputra. As he is not in his hut, his neighbour Patanjali, a skinny and bonny man of ninety with no relatives and no permanent place of residence is arrested because he has declared himself to be “a disciple of the Great Hermit of the Mountain who lived down the river” (City 25). When Dharma tells Patanjali, “You only have to apologise and you will be set free, he boldly interrogates “But why should I apologise? I have done no wrong. Rather the Grand Master should apologise for making such absurd rules” (City 26). A state sponsored terrorism is let loose and a large number of boatmen, who have spurned the Astrologer’s Three Truths and burnt the Grand Master’s effigies are thrown into the Gold Mines. Every effort is made to crush their protest and make them fall in line. Later Bhumiputra, commonly known as Master Bhoma, a teacher of Mathematics is stealthily arrested for no cause and is sentenced to punishment in the Gold Mines.

The Grand Master and his allies are dead against Bhumiputra because he has been popularizing the slogan “The naked king” when he
was teaching in the University. Being a lover of honesty and truthfulness, he opposes the malpractices of the Grand Master. He is considered by the police as the “kingpin of a conspiracy” against the Grand Master (City 43).

As Bhumiputra was born, brought up and educated in the mud-huts, he was a friend and supporter of the boatmen who are opposers of the Grand Master. His parents were weavers of the fine silk from which Shailaja’s dresses and the Grand Master’s tunics were made. His parents died in an epidemic caused by the toxic cooking oil made by the boatmen. Then Bhoma went to live with an uncle, finished high school and then got an employment in the Professor’s lab as a cleaner of telescopes. Finding Bhoma’s ability with numbers, the Professor insisted that he should study Mathematics. He studied Maths for six years even as he continued to be the Professor’s telescope cleaner. Then Master Bhoma taught at the University but he kept aloof from other teachers. When he heard the other staff praising the Three Truths of the Astrologer, he started explaining the parable of “the naked king” in his classes for fourteen days till he was warned by the staff secretary. He was accused for “making subversive propaganda at the University” (City 43).

Unlike the other university teachers who side with the Grand master to ensure his blessing, Bhoma firmly believes that the king is “Naked” (City 153). Master Bhoma’s parable “The king is naked” became a slogan and a cry of revolt. Walls were found decorated with it. It appeared on the
blackboards and even in toilets. The meaning of the parable is that Truth cannot be suppressed for long. The whole university is taken by storm. “The authorities started receiving letters that on being opened contained nothing more than a sheet of art paper “The king is naked” colligraphed neatly on either side (City 155). This parable is about a King’s playing on his people’s fear and claiming that his new robes would be visible only to the loyal. Fearing punishment for disloyalty, everybody is all praise for his non-existent clothes till one day a child blurts out, “the king is naked” and the remark is picked up by the multitude and eventually swells into an angry demand for Truth. When Bhoma was about to be taken to task, he discontinued his “preaching” and he believed that others would continue it. “The officials arresting Bhooma because of his reverence for Truth is seen by them as incipient subversion . . . and it signifies dehumanization, irrational exercise of power” (Padma 110).

In order to become the supreme power as he had dreamt, the Grand Master appoints his supporters in high positions. There is obvious rift between power and qualification. The ruler gives ministerial posts to unqualified persons and not according to talents and intellect. For example the post of the Education Adviser is given to a person who has won the support of students and teachers whereas the talent or capability is not taken into consideration at all. For political reasons, appointments are made to encourage politics rather than for efficient administration.
Another example to show the power psychosis is the Grand Master’s great move to make his son as his descendant in ruling the city. The Rallies Master is made to organize rallies in support of the Grand Master’s son so that the people are coaxed to believe that he too is endeared by the masses. The Rallies Master admits that, he must “gather rallies not only for the Grand Master but for his son as well” (*City* 76).

The Grand Master’s secret plan and the Rallies Master’s rallies are intended to implant good opinion of the son of the Grand Master and popularise him among the masses. While the Grand Master ensures his political power in the city, the Rallies Master tries to impress the masses. The Grand Master uses the Astrologer as a tool to carry out his master plan of making his son the next heir to the throne. The Astrologer puts forth his arguments in favour of the perpetuation of the rule of the Grand Master’s family thus:

No sacrifice is greater than the sacrifice of a young son. But we know we are asking this sacrifice from a family that has for a hundred years sacrificed its men, its women, its children, its wealth, its very all for the sake of this city. They have suffered endless privation just so that this city might prosper. Such is the family that we are asking this sacrifice of and we have no doubt that the Grand Master will listen to
our pleadings. This city needs his son and he must give him to us. (101)

Discarding the hoary tradition of the city, the Grand Master wants to crown his son and make him his descendant by foul means. The way is made smooth by the tricks of his father. Without the consent and support of the masses, the Grand Master is preparing the way for his son as he has a power-conscious psyche. The Minister of the Trade comments, “at one go every tradition of the city is abandoned. But even that does not satisfy the Grand Master. He must crown the son as well, make him an heir apparent above the heads of all of us, put him on the Advisory Council, and, in days to come, train him for a thousand mischief” (*City* 111).

In another attempt to gain power and popularity, the Grand Master arranges the Festival of the River through which the Astrologer pressurizes the people to take an oath of allegiance:

In life and in death, I shall not rest, until the last of the *asuras*, the last of the conspirators, the last of the traitors is eliminated from our city and laid in the grave.

In this struggle, I shall hold my allegiance to the Grand Master and to no one else. If I break this covenant, entered this day of the Festival of the Great River, may the Great River curse me, strike me dead, lay waste my seed for twenty generations. So help me God. (100)
In order to perpetuate his rule, the Grand Master follows the way of the despotic rulers. At the end of the oath taking ceremony, the son of the Grand Master is crowned as the new king. According to S. Sharma, “the megalomaniac Grand Master is not content with consolidating his position only, but wants his son also to ascend the throne after him” (114-15).

In order to become the most powerful king, to discourage dissent and to suppress the opposers, the Grand Master commands his henchmen to harass the dissenters, causing them very many inconveniences and even disabling them. The Headman of the dissenters cum the lady chief of the boatmen is blinded. “During the night the guards pierced the Headman’s eyes with long pointed needles and poured acid into the perforations” (City 164). Another malpractice to discourage dissent is to restrict the growth of the population of the section of people who are disloyal to the ruler. He tries to speed up the growth of his supporters and restrict the population of the dissenters. According to Meitei, “It is his inordinate desire to become a king that leads him from one chaotic step to another, alienating himself from his subjects” (53).

The tool of the Grand Master is the Astrologer and he advances attractive arguments in order to justify the identification of the Grand Master with the river. He tells the Headman, “All I ask is that you also swear to the Grand Master. He and the great river are one” (City 164). The river is a symbol of Time and divine mother to whom the boatmen
owe their allegiance. The boatmen and the mud people cannot digest the fact that they are the children of the Grand Master. They are mentally affixed to the fact that they are children of the river and they belong to the river. So also the educated upper class such as the Professor and the Astrologer feel that they belong to the city and not to the Grand Master. The Astrologer prophesies that the future city and the River are going to be under the hands of the Grand Master. He narrates the prophecy thus:

Who knows, who can read the signs,
The workings of immortal time?
A king I see upon a throne,
In astronomer’s grove the boatmen mourn,
A thing of darkness growing dark,
On city walls the shadow’s mark.
The river I see from a teacher rise.
The hermit, the parrot, the teacher die.
Under a rain the waters burn,
To his kingdom at last the king returns. (26)

The dream of the Grand Master is in conformity with this prophesy. For the Grand Master, his dream cannot be a faithful herald. According to the Astrologer’s understanding the Grand Master’s dream suggests that the present Grand Master will be the King of the city in future. He says, “Yet such dreams come out of the depth of great truths and carry in them the
truth of the times. If the times are troubled, the troubles must be faced. It is no secret that the city has become an unruly place, a plaything of asuras” (City 15). The Grand Master takes all efforts to become the King of the city. To make his dream a reality, he lets his coteries adopt ruthless measures to crush the masses as he fails to deviate them from their righteous path. He employs different tactics to draw them to his side.

In the kingdom of the Grand Master, there is eternal conflict between allegiance to man and allegiance to God. The allegiance to man results in the coming of the Grand Master as a king and the allegiance to God with Grand Master’s descend from the Seven Hills. “A King I see upon a throne and that signifies that the Grand Master is destined to come to the throne as the king of the city” (City 26). The Grand Master is a tool in the hands of fate and has confidently declared himself as the King or God. It is imperative that the ruler should be powerful but not take sides with any group or party. It is stated:

As far as peace and stability are concerned, our history clearly indicates that we have been stable only when ruled by a strong yet benevolent king. Nation states and such things have never been understood by the average citizen. He always reserved his allegiance for the monarch. At the same time of course, the monarch took full responsibility for the
citizens’ material and spiritual needs. In short, gentlemen, what this city needs above all is a monarch, a king. (211)

The people of the city cannot tolerate the Grand Master and his wicked rule. There is increasing opposition against the Grand Master. The Professor and Shailaja’s brother use Bhome’s parable about the king to expose the moral nakedness of the Grand Master. Shailaja’s brother tries to communicate to the crowd through the story of a naked king as if it were a ballad out of the city’s hoary past and himself as an ancient bard who has emerged from the depths of the Great River to remind the city of the long forgotten truth. On the second day he spoke like an Astrologer and narrated verses in an ununderstandable ancient tongue to reveal the hollowness of the rule. The people who are “lulled into sleep are now awakened to their surroundings” (City 127). People realize that the rule of the Grand Master has a corroding impact on the souls of those who are struggling against their extinction. Dharma’s father sees a hole in his chest. It is described:

It had started one morning when shaving before a mirror, he thought he saw a hole in his reflection. He could see through the hole the reflection of a chair that stood at his back. He thought the mirror was defective and examined it with a magnifying glass. The mirror was perfect . . . . Every time he faithfully executed a directive of the Grand Master or of a
Council a new patch appeared. “My insides are rotting. I too am just vanishing,” thought Father, in panic. (133)

Dharma’s father later feels stiffness in his joints and his mind turns blank and his will is reduced to zero. He has identified similar symptoms in his colleagues in the Advisory Council. He realizes that “the more his colleagues agreed with the Minister, the more spastic his movements became” (City 135). His friend says “It is the Three Truths Syndrome, stasis of the soul. Atrophy of the brain and locomotor functions which means that they have all turned into robots” (City 135). In a chaotic, materialistic and sterile rule of the Grand Master, each character has a sorry tale of his own to narrate. They experience weariness, hollowness and emptiness in their lives. “It is a clear picture of what man has become when cruelty, corruption, violence, hypocrisy, deception and material benefits dominate the society” (V. Dwivedi 129).

The Grand Master has a powerful opponent in Bhoma or Bhumiputra who works as a teacher and a guide to the boatmen who are oppressed by the Grand Master. The news of Bhoma’s return from the river spreads from hamlet to hamlet and from hut to hut. The boatmen crowd at the professor’s grove to tell Master Bhoma their tale of woe. Master Bhoma drives away their fear of death by saying “guns can kill your bodies, . . . if you are afraid to die then your soul is already dead” (City 146). They again swear their allegiance to the great river and not to a
“wraith.” The news reaches the Commissioner that the boatmen have once again refused to take the Astrologer’s oath and they help Master Bhoma to hide in huts and groves. A magician among them has built an oarless boat to carry him off shore. It is described:

All the day Master Bhoma drifted on the vast expanse of the river. At night magical music brought him back to land and sitting in one mangrove or another he told tales of the naked king and many other tales that spoke of wisp-like rulers that had once danced upon the earth but danced no more. (147)

At night Bhumiputra springs into action. The Great Hermit of the mountain assures him that he is just a tool in the hands of God and motivates him to act. He reveals the secret that “this city, this world, all this is the manifestation of the One and not the shadow of the Grand Master’s ego, as the Grand Master might imagine” (City 156). All things are in God’s hands and God can manifest his deeds only through men like Bhumiputra. It is according to the will of God that the world runs. The role of man in the plan of the Universe and the value of individual choice is very important. “There is the upward path that leads to freedom and there is a downward path that . . . must lead to perdition” (City 156). Whenever he feels alone he will have the company of the river. “Let the great river speak with you. Never forget that she is always with you, helping you and guiding you and she is the wisest of us all” (City 157). Master Bhoma
decides to continue his preaching against the Grand master. With the help of the journalist Vasu, Master Bhoma meets the Grandfather who is an ardent admirer of Master Bhoma. He requests the homeless Bhoma to stay with him as Shani, his great-grandson offers his hut to him. “It is the Grandfather who courageously keeps Bhoma at his farm, risking his own life and liberty” (Chandra 271).

In order to become the unopposed King of the city, the opponents of the Grand Master are imprisoned in the Gold Mines as they have sworn their allegiance to the river and not to the Grand Master. The Professor, the Headman, Shailaja’s brother and Little Star are some of the noted prisoners. Each night after the guards slept, they went from dungeon to dungeon telling the naked king’s parable to “lighten the boatmen’s burden” (City 163). One night the Grand Master’s Astrologer, dressed in silks guarded by a hundred men compelled the Headman to swear allegiance to the Grand Master. But the Headman very firmly said that her allegiance is to the Great River. So the guards fell upon the Headman and carried her away. The Professor and the boatmen who tried to intervene were beaten black and blue with clubs. During the night the guards pierced the Headman’s eyes with long pointed needles and poured acid into the perforations. The Headman screamed, not because of the pain but in anger. “Her screams shook the Gold Mines and the glass fell from the buildings
on the Seven Hills and even the Grand Master sitting in his high backed chair looked up . . .” (*City* 165).

To show his dissent, the Professor refused food till his demands were met. He became weaker day by day. It is stated: On the third day the professor took a scrap of soiled paper and with a piece of black rock write out the following demands:

One, the Grand Master and the Astologer be tried for putting out the Headman’s eyes. Two, all prisoners be told their crimes or be set free. Until his demands were met, . . . he would neither eat nor drink. (165)

Shailaja’s brother carried the Professor’s demands to the administrator of the Gold Mines. Nobody cared to concede with his demands. The Professor fasted for seven days and he became very weak. “. . . for the liberation and salvation of mankind the Professor offers to sacrifice his own life” (L. Kumar 123). Little star and the Headman were watching him with tears in their eyes. He heard heavenly music and bright stars from the sky nearing him. He predicted “the city is on fire . . . This evil cannot last. There must be a new beginning. . . . There will be no Grand Masters, There will be a new world, a new race of men will be born. I shall watch from wherever I am” (*City* 167). Bidding his last farewell, the Professor died. The spies of the Grand Master brought him the news of the Professor’s death. As he was a renowned astronomer, respected by the mud and brick
people, he wanted to issue a decree accepting the Professor’s last wish that the prisoners be told of their crimes and the innocent be set free.

The death of the Professor becomes a matter of grave concern for the Grand Master, who with his power game to become the king does not want his image to be tarnished but shining and glittering. He pretends to be a just ruler, who satisfies the demands of his subjects. The release of the prisoners is just an eye wash and another decree follows suit. “No prisoner was to be set free unless he proves his innocence” (*City* 172). For Master Bhoma “the decree was further evidence of the contempt in which the Grand Master held the inhabitants of the city” (*City* 174). The Great Hermit claims all these happenings as part of his *yajna* to purify this world:

This *yajna* of the mud people, Patanjali, burns only on sacrifice. When the fire is low, when the flame is dying, men must feed it with their own lives. And, who knows, the gods now call for the Professor’s life? Who knows this be the great purpose that they have reserved for him? (166)

The news of the Professor’s death causes great commotion in the city. The blinding of the Headman and the cruelty perpetrated on her are intolerable to the people. The boatmen are hurt by the inhuman treatment meted out to their Headman. Moreover the prisoners are not let out. The innocent are still in prison. Grandfather is in low spirit and Master Bhoma after dusk travels in an oarless boat without boatman to different places to
address crowd of boatmen and inspire them to action with the parable of the naked king. Every time he tells the parable, the boatmen listen to him with attention, even though they have heard it many times before. “Every time Bhumiputra tells the parable it comes out differently” (City 175). Master Bhoma describes a darkness that spreads farther each day, swallowing the city, the river, and the sky. Under the guidance of Bhoma, a campaign is launched for the release of the Headman and the other prisoners. The boatmen spend long hours in writing petitions and submitting them to the offices that stand on the Seven Hills. Their petitions are accepted by liveried attendants who give them stamped receipts in return. The boatmen hang about the offices all hours of day and night. They are abused and accosted by the attendants and in this way they spend their savings. When an attendant fails to keep his word after getting money, a quarrel crops up and many boatmen and attendants are injured.

The boatmen who come to plead for the prisoners at the palace of the Grand Master during his sleeping hours is treated mercilessly by the guards. They ask the boatmen to disperse quietly as strict silence has to be maintained at the sleeping time of the Grand Master. When persuasion fails, they force them down the hill with the help of water cannons. Screaming boatmen could be seen rolling pell-mell down the slopes right into the Square of the Three Truths and to the eternal fountain. They complain to Master Bhoma about the atrocities of the Grand Master.
Thousands of eyes watch Bhoma and wait to hear him speak. He begins thus:

I speak because you have asked me to speak and I say to you the king is naked. I say to you the Seven Hills are naked. The decree, my brothers, is a lie. Nothing has changed. Nothing will change. From pyramid and palace the shadow shall creep farther each day. Well might the boatmen’s cry rend the sky but not a word, I say, shall pass the ears of these deaf phantoms of the night. (177-78)

The boatmen insist that they should know about the course of action that they should take. They are waiting for the command of Master Bhoma whose tongue moves in spite of himself. He stirs the boatmen with his speech:

Brothers and Sisters, the pyramids, the palace, the Seven Hills, deaf though they now be to the boatmen’s cries, it is by the sweat of the boatmen’s brow that such things are built. And it is by the sweet of his brow that brick mansions are raised, and avenues laid, and avenues made straight, and the armour of the soldier bought. It is by your sweat, my brothers, that the wealth of this city is produced. And now, I say to you, you will refuse these shameless phantoms the sweat of your brow, the skill of your hands. Let the boats be
pulled out and upturned. As the great river is our witness, let us vow that not a boat, not a leaf, not even a piece of straw, shall move on the river’s breast, until these dark phantoms open their eyes and their ears give no heed. This, my brothers and sister, is what I say. (178)

The inspiring speech of Master Bhoma springs the boatmen to action. “Like Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*, Bhumiputra finds the meaning of his life not in escape but in action” (Nawale, “Existential”). A little later, the boatmen lined themselves in three and a half leagues long along the river bank, which stretched through the Professor’s grove to the far ends of the city. Bhoma sprinkled water on his head and chest and on the first boatmen. Then he uttered a vow which was repeated by the boatmen.

O my mother, I am a nameless boatmen of this city of gold.

O my mother, I am 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. So the great river be my witness. (178-79)

The second boatman takes the chant from the first and so it travels far and wide down the bank of the river. The news of the boatmen’s strike shakes
the Seven Hills only briefly. It leads to a complete disruption of river transport in the city. Further, dragnets are launched to suppress the boatmen and the mud people. The conflict between the boatmen and the police reaches its zenith signifying the conflict between good and evil. Due to internal rivalries a secret deal between the Education Advisor and the Minister of Trade, induces the shock brigades which consists of students and teachers join the boatmen and the Commissioner receives a humiliating defeat.

The defeated Commissioner gives an ultimatum to the boatmen that if their strike was not withdrawn within twenty four hours, their licence would be cancelled and the task of maintaining river transport would be entrusted to the navy. The warning proves futile and naval boats took over the task of river transport. The shock-brigades converted their strike into a general uprising. Within hours it spreads from the river to the pyramids. “Shops, schools, buses, telephone exchanges and railway stations were systematically burnt. Banks were threatened with time bombs . . . eighteen police stations were gutted and their armouriers ransacked” (City 182).

To cap it all, in the next night, aided by the shock-brigades, the boatmen break into the Gold Mines where the Headman is interned. They run screaming through the labyrinths breaking fetters and handcuffs. They find the Headman sitting all alone by herself in the dark. It is described:
In the light of torches they looked at her perforated eyes and for a moment their screaming turned into a deathly hush. Then a wail went up that sent a tremor through the Seven Hills and the brick-people thought the earth was quaking. An orgy of violence followed that by morning turned the Gold Mines into a heap of rubble. The Headman and Shailaja’s brother were freed. When they learnt about the Professor the boatmen lost their head. They ran through the city burning police stations, ransacking armouries. (182-83)

The Advisory Council, which blindly supports the Grand Master is roused to fury. A unanimous resolution is passed to restore the city’s peace. Police armouries remain open and there is a battle between the police and the boatmen with the shock-brigades. The police cannot withstand the attack of the shock-brigades as they are well armed. So the fury of the police is turned to “Great River Boats” which belong to Dharma’s father-in-law. The sit-in-strikers are mercilessly shot by the police and two hundred men are shot dead by the machine gun. Dharma being one among the shot-party is pricked by his conscience and he has a nervous breakdown.

The atrocities perpetrated on the downtrodden leads to the liberation of prisoners from the Gold Mines and the strike of the boatmen. The boatmen put up barricades all along the river and on Avenue Asthough.
The fight between the boatmen and their allies against the Commissioner’s men rages more vigorously than before. The Headman wants to set fire to the city. But Master Bhoma convinces her and so she agrees to submit a petition first and wait for seven days. But the Grand Master and the Astrologer set the petition on fire and pretend that they do not know about it. Seven days passed and there is no reply from the Grand Master. So Master Bhoma tries through Vasu and gets the petition printed in two newspapers to give it wide publicity.

At the instigation of the Grand Master and to end Bhoma conspiracy a Second Deed of National Partnership is signed between the army and the Minister for Trade. The army is represented by General Starch and his deputy who is the Son-in-law of the Grand Trader. With characteristic military candour, they make it clear that the army would do nothing that might hurt the Grand Master or the city. Negotiation follows swiftly and an agreement is quickly reached. The generals agree to support the Minister’s candidature for the Grand Mastership in the city. “They also agreed to quell . . . the present uprising as well as any such uprisings that might occur during the period of the agreement” (City 196). The partnership is signed at midnight. General Starch finally pledges eternal friendship to the Minister for Trade, his comrade-in-arms. Thus it is quite evident that the city has reached its darkest hour of crisis and the administrative machinery is cracking down gradually.
When the news of the two Deeds of National Partnership reaches the Grand Master, he is surprised but not alarmed. He takes up the issue with General Starch while reviewing a military parade. The parade is organized to convince the peace-loving citizen that he is well protected and there is no need for fear or panic. The military parade is to march through the unbarricaded streets. The display of power would end at the pyramids, where a grand tattoo is planned.

When Shailaja’s brother returns to the barricades, a council is in progress and the Commissioner has given an ultimatum. The boatmen are given twenty hours to dismantle the barricades and return to work. Their strike has caused the disruption of the city’s life. It is expected that in the absence of a more co-operative attitude from the boatmen, the authorities would be forced to take suitable measures. The demands of the boatmen would be considered only after the withdrawal of the strike. But the boatmen know that it is just “humbug and a shameless trap” (City 206). The colonel of the shock-brigades read out an important message from the Advisor:

Comrades: the ultimatum of the Police Commissioner is nothing but the dying yelp of the jackal. It is the same animal whom you have thrashed and skinned at a hundred barricades. What has now happened that this jackal has turned into a lion? Or, is it that it has learnt to imitate the
lion’s roar? Let the jackal remember, a lion’s roar does not make a lion. . . . the boatmen warriors . . . fighting by your side they will lay down their lives to the last man. Our covenant is sealed with the blood of our dead. It will be honoured to the last breath until we are victorious. (206-07)

The boatmen cheer for a long time. The Headman assures the Colonel that “the boatmen are also committed to die to the last man” (City 207). Then the Headman introduces Shailaja’s brother to Master Bhoma who embraces his old pupil. The Headman advises the boatmen to fight for their freedom:

There are perhaps other ways to fight this, but we do not know of them. It is an ancient evil that has come out of the Seven Hills. So, let the boatmen fight it in their ancient way. The beast we now face is deaf and blind and is set on a single purpose, the Astrologer’s oath. The king that was naked is naked still. Death, I say, is preferable to surrender to this king. (208)

He tells Bhumiputra about the inevitable death which awaits everyone at the appointed hour, “Death is certain for all and here is a reason to die. As I told you the course of our struggle is set. Let it run” (City 208). Thus the crisis which has enveloped the city gets bleaker and alarming.
At the hour of crisis, the Grand Master without taking any steps to make peace in the City of Seven Hills, smoothens the way for him to become the King as he has dreamt. So he summons the members of the Supreme Council to decide upon the selection of the king. In the dead of night, while in the streets, a savage battle rages between the Commissioner’s men and the boatmen. The Council consisting of seven men analyses the caste and heredity factor in the choice of a king. The Education Advisor suggests “that only persons who wear the sacred thread be eligible for becoming kings” (City 211). The Minister opposes the suggestion of election of a king because there is a question of the right caste. He interrogates, “Once the office of the king is thrown open to elections can the Supreme Council prevent the lower castes from putting in their claims? Does the Supreme Council wish to sow a whirlwind that our children and grandchildren shall reap? (City 212). The Education Advisor takes up the issue of heredity. The Minister replies that it is a complex issue but they have to agree to the supremacy of heredity. “We have to ask ourselves, can a race horse be born of a mule, or even to an ordinary horse. It is only heredity, carefully cultivated over centuries, that can provide suitable kings for this city” (City 212). Finally the Minister of Trade sums up the criteria that the king of the city should meet:

First, . . . 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 this city. Third, he must command the affection of our masses and the trust of the armed forces and the business class. Fourth, he should be above the petty squabbles of the bazaar. (213)

Then he proposes the Grand Master as the king as he is the only person who satisfies the criteria put forth by the Council. The Grand Master with deep emotion accepts the onerous burdens of the king’s high office and he accepts the new position with fake humbleness. He speaks:

I accept your command, which is for me, is the command of the city, the command of the humblest of the humble, and the wretched of the wretched. With your help and God’s grace, I shall not cease my labour until I have wiped away every tear from the eye of every citizen of this great city. (213)

As the Grand Master is proposed as the new king, he is glad that his dream has come true. He recommends the name of the Minister for Trade as his successor. The Minister of Trade as soon as he accepts his new office as the Grand Master, exerts his authority to suppress all conspirators. He says the unresolved conspiracy of Master Bhoma whose intention is to assassinate the top officials in the government and the leaders of the army should be resolved. The new Grand Master suggests that as far as Bhoma is concerned, the Commission should produce him dead or alive within seventy two hours and in this matter General Starch should assist him.
The circumstances of the city suggest to the Great Hermit that there is no time left to mind. The recordings of the Council has not surprised the Hermit. Though he has expected adverse happenings, he is tensed and disturbed. From his little room, staring at the river, he raises few questions, “What should I do? Is there still time? Is there hope? Is there a point?” (City 216). Then the Hermit lighting a lamp goes up to an old chest and takes out a wooden box consisting of a papyrus scroll which is the city’s horoscope. The scroll is “covered with geometric forms and words from the ancient tongue that no one understood. Finally he came to the last figure which was the figure of a parallelogram with black sides and red diagonals and minute littering in black that covered the sides and the diagonals” (City 216). On a piece of papyrus, the Hermit copies out the parallelogram and the words. The parallelogram is a part of the prophecy. It reads as follows:

Who knows, who can read the signs,
The workings of immortal times?
A king I see upon a throne,
In astronomer’s grove the boatmen mourn,
A thing of darkness growing dark,
On city walls the shadow’s mark.
The river, I see, from a teacher rise.
The hermit, the parrot, the teacher die.
Under a rain the waters burn,

To his kingdom at last the king returns. (216)

The Great Hermit opens the city’s horoscope and sends it to the Astrologer for further interpretation with the note which says:

Astrologer, I send you my greetings. What I send you herewith you will doubtless recognize. The wheel has nearly come full circle. The hour of God is upon us and the time is short. As you had hoped, a king now sits on the throne. My death and the death of the teacher are certain. . . . I beg of you to once again consider the meaning of the line that we have so long disputed . . . . I beg you to bring forth both the interpretations to the knowledge of the king. Let him choose. . . . More than the future of the king, Astrologer, what is involved here is the future of a city, a civilization . . . .

farewell-till, in another birth, we meet again. (217)

The Grand Master, who is very complacent in his new position of the King slights the prophecy and its inner meaning. He emphasizes only on the coming of a king and he is already made as “the lord and master of the Seven Hills” (City 218). The king is devoid of any faith in God. He is not afraid of anything. He asks “And God – what is God? Where is He? Does He even exist? He must surely have other things to worry about than intervene in the affairs of this city where we in any case rule” (City 219).
The Commissioner who is a staunch supporter of the new King makes his way to the farm of the Grandfather. Through his spies he comes to know that Master Bhoma has been staying with the Grandfather. He spots Bhoma from his jeep. Only sixty hours left to arrest Bhoma. Seeing the grim situation in Grandfather’s house, the Commissioner warns Master Bhoma not to try for an escape before he would come to arrest him within two days. The Commissioner returns to the Headquarters, where the Captain of the flying Patrol is waiting for him. The Captain informs the Minister for Trade and the new Grand Master about the Commissioner who for unknown reasons has not arrested Master Bhoma. Immediately an order is issued to the effect of the Commissioner’s dismissal and arrest. He is hand-cuffed, arrested and imprisoned for treason. In his place a new Commissioner is appointed.

The new King with great dexterity is able to coax the shock-brigades, the allies of the boatmen to his side and so the shock-brigades betray their comrades. The boatmen are bare without the armaments and ammunition of the shock-brigades. The banner with the caption “The King is Naked” is torn down and replaced with “Long live the King” (City 224). The boatmen inform the happenings to the blind Headman but Shailaja’s brother, a loyal comrade of the boatmen falls down at her feet saying “Headman, you have been betrayed by my comrades. I have stayed back because I must atone for their treachery. You may please now take my
head and avenge your betrayal” (*City* 224). But the Headman treats him kindly and orders the boatmen to be ready with their spears, bows and arrows to attack the king’s men.

The king’s men appear with a master plan to attack the boatmen. They are invisible to the boatmen as they come in grey green tanks filled with lasers which are twice the height of a mudhut. The boatmen are given just three minutes to clear out. The boatmen answer with a volley of arrows and abuse. “The arrows merely bounced off the armour and fell in a shower of twisted steel” (*City* 226). At the end of three minutes, three seconds are given on grace. “At the end of the thirty seconds, the Hermit saw the tanks simply roll over the first of the barricades, crunching the pile of wood and stone as though it were driftwood” (*City* 226). General Starch has not allowed the tanks to open fire to unarmed men. The boatmen regroup to put up more and more barricades. Towards sunset they have chopped off the whole of the Professor’s grove and piled the trees high. From behind this pile, they kill a gunner. The infuriated tank commander, brushing aside General Starch’s request, orders a total attack. A single laser is at first fired but it is enough to set the barricade ablaze. Then three tanks come up to form a neat front and fire their silent lasers for fifteen seconds. The amazed boatmen are burning. “Charred, the look of surprise still on their faces, they fell where they stood. Moving with extraordinary precision, obeying the cool commander’s orders, the tanks now pushed the
charred boatmen and the burning mangrove into the swollen river” (City 227).

The power struggle destroys the innocent. The best example are Shailaja’s brother and father. In spite of the hermit’s persuasion, Shailaja’s brother lights a pyre which sets the river ablaze. With the blessings of the Great Hermit, he climbs into the fire and disappears. Father is arrested for drafting the New Decree in such a deliberate way causing jamming of the rails. Another man who is on the hit list is Master Bhoma. Grandfather is so concerned with him that he wants to prove his innocence to the police Commissioner. The King refuses to see Grandfather and read his ten paged petition.

The King is resolved to completely destroy his opponents. He agrees with his Son to launch a combined attack with the three services. The son suggests:

According to my watch the sunset today is at 19.05 hrs. I suggest that a gunboat is sent down the river to take position behind the objective at no later than 18.30 hrs. At 18.50 the air force should para-drop at least one hundred commandos and cordon off the area. The latest helicopters should be used for the purpose. Another fifty commandos should accompany the Commissioner with the camouflaged cannon. (237-38)
He too wants to personally co-ordinate the attack. General Starch appreciates the plan. At 18.30 hrs, Shailaja and Shani see a gunboat come griding through the waves, its grey-blue hull parting the turbulent waters. The boat’s decks are lined with civilians in ordinary clothes and not with uniformed soldiers. The cannons shine in dull light. Two men in ordinary clothes sit behind the machine gun turrets. On the bridge a man in civilian clothes watch them out of binoculars.

While the gunboat anchors, Son is getting into the Command helicopter at 18.45 hrs. Soon the air is filled with the drone of helicopters. Men drop in parachutes. Vasu informs Grandfather about what he sees. Two trucks stand in front of the farm gates. Captain of the Flying Patrol or the new Commissioner gets out of the first truck. The other is the brigadier in charge of the commandos. At 19.15 hrs the assault finally begins. The charge is led by a colonel. The commandos rush from room to room upsetting furniture. The colonel and a commando emerge pushing Grandfather and Bhoma before them. Both of them sit on the verandah refusing to move. Grandfather has chained his left hand to Bhoma’s right with a chain in a particularly clever knot and he has put a lock at the end of it. The colonel is at a loss to know how to proceed. Seeing the capture of Grandfather and Bhoma, Shailaja grows hysterical. The commando hits Bhoma with the butt of his rifle. It is described thus:
As the rifle hit his cheek the mathematics teacher felt half a dozen teeth fall onto his tongue. The second blow fell on his ear and his eardrum exploded into his skull. His eyes bulged at the pain but he did not utter a sound. As though a tap had been opened, blood gushed out of his ear and nose. . . . Grandfather’s free arm flailing helplessly, trying to protect Master Bhoma. In the same instant, they saw the rifle butt smash into Grandfather’s own face. (245)

The sight of Grandfather and Bhoma is so horrible that Shailaja and Mother cannot bear it and they run away from their corner.

To the new Commissioner, innocent Bhoma is an arch-criminal. While he is running towards the river, he fires two quick shots. Immediately a person falls down dead and it is Dharma. Infuriated Shani who has sympathy for the Grandfather and his family shoots down the new Commissioner. The Son orders the brigadier to bring up the cannon and “reduce the enemy’s hold-out to dust” (City 246). The sympathetic brigadier is arrested, tied and taken to the truck. The loaded cannon fires at the Grandfather’s house and turns it into a heap of burning rubble. The next shell blows Shani and his little hut into the river. Another shell falls in the middle of the rose garden spewing a fountain of earth and rose petals. The other falls behind the house destroying the outhouses.
The Great Hermit wakes up with the entrance of General Starch’s parrot who says, “It is time now” (*City* 248). In the pre-dawn darkness, the Hermit knocks at the house of the widow of a boatman and asks her to accompany him along with her illegal child. While going down the street, mud people join them in a little procession. The Hermit along with Little Star lights a fire. The Hermit says:

My children, I shall now perform the *Yajna* of Immortal Time and of the great river who is his consort. It was performed on the Annual Festival of the River by the Court Astrologer but the Court Astrologer has blasphemed. So to erase the blasphemy, I shall perform it once again. I shall do so in the tongue that no one understands, but you will hear it in your hearts and you will know that the blasphemy done to your mother, the great river, has been erased.

This illegal child whose father died in the Gold Mines for his illegality, shall pour the *ahuti*. (249)

When the Hermit ends his *yajna*, the sun rises lighting up the vast expanse of the river. Awe-struck, the crowd gazes at the limitless waters of the river that has spread to the horizon. Then the crowd turns around and looks at the mountain whose snow-covered peak has miraculously become visible. High above the palace, the pyramids, the Seven Hills, and the peak
glow pink and yellow and finally they all merge into a blinding white that no human eye could stand. The Hermit finally says:

Now listen to this. You see this illegal child. With a great love has the great river loved him. She will send him a raft in the middle of the coming night. The raft shall have a light burning in its prow but it will not have either oarsmen or oars. You will put this illegal child on the raft and you will not ask questions. Nor will this woman ask questions; and none of you will ride on the raft beside him. This is my final word. (250)

Seeing an armoured car, the crowd around the Hermit quickly disperses. The Hermit walks to his cottage. He has anointed the child and it would reach Great Yogeshwara, the man who was the teacher of himself and the Astrologer. In the dark, the Hermit goes to the Grandfather’s farm which was damaged by the shells. He walks to the crater of the ruined rose garden. From the rim of the crater, he collects a handful of roses, then returns to the debris under which Grandfather, Mother, Dharma, Shailaja, Vasu and Bhoma lay. Little Star stands at the edge of the rubble. Then he scatters the flowers over the burning rubble and recites the ancient prayer with which the dead of their race are sent from this world to the next. Then they go to Shani’s hut which remains just a debris and the Hermit puts a rose and repeats the same prayer. The shells that have destroyed
Grandfather’s home and ruined his rose garden have also blown away the embankment.

While the suppression of the people goes on, a change in the river is noticed by the Great Hermit. “The sky had once again become overcast. The clouds hung low and they were black. More clouds were rolling in from the horizon. Below him the river was rising” (*City* 227). The river has filled the crater and covers the wreckage of the farm house. It is spilling out into the city. With the rain, there is high wind as though a great god is rousing himself from sleep. The music in high volume fills the four quarters of the sky. With the rising of another strong wind, the angry river removes the embankment by its roots and flings it like a pebble into the churning whirlpools. Soon the mud-huts and the brick mansions are washed away. The waters reach the Seven Hills. The king watches the unprecedented spectacle with horror and terror.

When the river rises in full swing and becomes flooded, the king who has been despotic and diabolic is helpless. The rising water represents the protestors against the king. It is described thus:

The waters now reached the top of the fourth hill on which the offices of the new Grand Master stood. A wave went up encircling the base of the building. The touch of chrome and glass seemed to cause a special reaction in the foaming waters because all of a sudden the river was not a river
anymore. Under the all pervasive glow of the searchlights it turned into an ancient sea, like the sea that had first condensed on the whirling planet a billion years ago. Waves nearly as high as the building rose in quick succession and threw a lock around the shining structure. (257)

As the waters rise higher, the river plucks out great chunks of earth from the foundation of the towering buildings and the crash of its angry leaping works penetrates the insulation of the palace. It reaches the top of the fourth hill on which the office of the new Grand Master stands. The river resembles an ancient sea. Waves nearly as high as the building rise in quick succession and throws a lock around the shining structure. The inmates of the palace are panic stricken as the new Grand Master’s palace collapses floor by floor, frame by frame and falls into the sea. One last wave uproots the foundations and send them flying into the sky. The water sweeps over the top of the hill and cascades on to the other side in a loud waterfall.

The Astrologer alerts the king and urges him to proceed to the pyramids. The king and his party takes the underground vaults of the palace, a tunnel that leads directly to the pyramids. The electricity fails bringing the conveyor belt to a halt. The half a mile walk seems much too long. By the time they reach the other end, the river is already there. It is described:
For seven days and seven nights it rained without a stop. On the eighth day the sun rose and from a clear sky stared down at a vast sea of water. The sea was calm and gave no hint of the agitation that had gone into its making. Of the Grand Master and his city nothing remained. (260)

According to Mathur, “the final disappearance of the City under the primordial waters of the river can be said to stand for the merger of the weak, fleeting, flawed creation into the powerful, eternal and supremely good” (153). After the destruction, on its ruins a new city has to be risen. It must be ruled by another Grand Master. The city has to be purified of the vices such as egoism, selfishness and stupidity of the old Grand Master. Purity can come only through sacrifice. That is the meaning of the boatmen’s rebellion. Once the Grand Master is purified within, he will see the world in a different light. The Great Yogeshwara tells the Nameless One:

On the ruins of that city, as always happens a new city has risen. It is ruled by another Grand Master, which, of course, need not always happen. In the new city is another Professor, another Bhumiputra, another tribe of boatmen. There is another Council and another set of Councillors. The men have other names but the forces 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. (262)

At the end of the novel with affirmation and assertion the Great Yogeshwara sends his disciple to teach people of the new city the significance of prayer, faith and understanding. He says:

The main thing is to prevent this endless repetition, this periodic disintegration. But to achieve that we need purity . . . . The city must purify itself . . . of egoism, selfishness and stupidity if it is not to dissolve again. (262-63)

The negation of these weaknesses is a pre-requisite to self-knowledge which brings understanding and unfolds the truth. Understanding brings commitment to pursue the righteous path with full vigour and faith in God. Though it is not easy, one must try as Great Yogeshwara says, “The question is not of success or failure; the question is of trying . . . . The city must strive once again for purity. But purity can come only through sacrifice” (City 263). The foundations of faith and right action rest on purity.

The significance of God to man is shown by The Great Hermit and he affirms God as “the highest Truth.” He is “the noblest thing each of us can imagine” (City 70) and “belief in God restores peace to human soul” (City 76). It is not success that we always get because “in any case we are only instruments . . . of the great God in the highest heaven who is the
master of the universe . . . . His is the Will. His is the Force” (*City* 264). The Great Yogeshwara is telling his pupil, the gospel of Dharma and revealing to him the mystery of the world. Both the Great Yogeshwara and the Nameless one are “instruments of great God in the highest heaven, who is the master of the Universe” (*City* 264). The Nameless One, though an illegal child is the chosen vessel of God. The river is the great mother and the boatmen are her children and they are ready to die for her. The great river speaks to her children when they are in trouble. The river sustains the city like a protecting mother and destroys it when it becomes too overbearing. For the upliftment of the whole society every individual has to be purified. Once this is done, the “endless repetition”, “the periodic disintegration” (*City* 262) will be prevented and a stable society will come to existence. An unquestionable faith in God and surrender to Him is the only solution to the threatened existence of human beings. “The novel ends on an optimistic note and certainly enlarges the vision of the reader and makes him aware of the causes of the eternal conflict” (Beniwal 275).

The novel embodies the view that one who misuses political power cannot escape undergoing punishment. The offender here is punished by nature. Though none of the opposers could succeed in removing the Grand Master, “nature is using water, one of the elements to punish the guilty. The fact signifies that Arun Joshi posits his faith in what has come to be known as the Divine Justice” (S. Sharma 251). One naturally comes to the
conclusion that the Grand Master meets his destiny because of his dream and his vaulting ambition to be on the heights. “It underscores the crisis and the fall of the contemporary materialistic society due to its Godlessness” (L. Kumar 140). The fag end is to achieve freedom or to attain perdition but the conclusion is in God’s hands. Everything is under the control of the Almighty.

The conflict between the City and the River in the novel is a conflict between the world, the materialistic dark world and the bright cosmic world. According to Mathur, “the final disappearance of the City under the primordial waters of the river can be said to stand for the merger of the weak, fleeting, flawed creation into the powerful, eternal and supremely good” (153). Almost all the characters of the novel merge into the spectrum of microcosms converging towards a particular place. The old man said:

This city, this world, all this is the manifestation of the One and not the shadow of the Grand Master’s ego, as the Grand Master might imagine. And it is he, the One without a second who, secretly supports and guides all that you see and what you do not see; . . . it is he who is the master of all men . . . and it is His will that men follow in every way. (155)

The ultimate destination of the attainment of salvation and the recurrent cycles of birth and death, creation and disintegration through self-
purification can be attained only through suffering and sacrifice. In his social vision, Joshi seems to profess that the despotic rule is the prime source of conflict and tension between man and man. The egoism of the despot is the sole cause for the tension and turmoil in human psyche. It can be resolved by developing the feelings of altruism. The devastation of the city by the primordial waters of the river is a sort of cleansing of an impure, selfish and faithless creation and it is replaced by another world full of hope and affirmation.

In his novels Arun Joshi suggests that dissociation from self and the world, disappointment and anxiety, purgation of soul and suffering are the unavoidable conditions for the spiritual upliftment of man. Today modern man, in spite of boasting to fathom the skies and touch the planets, he suffers from an inner conflict resulting from the paradoxical pulls within his self. The tiring situations in his life teach him the valuable lesson that withdrawing himself from all responsibilities of family and society is not the proper solution to the problems of life. Joshi upholds the truth that it is through self-purification, faith, suffering and sacrifice that divinity is restored and mankind gets salvation.