CHAPTER - 4

Beyond Alienation and Dispossession

Published in 1990 Arun Joshi's last novel *The City and the River* is a multi-dimensional and multilayered novel with infinite possibilities of meanings and interpretations. This novel, registers a radical departure from Arun Joshi's earlier novelistic concerns. This novel marks a departure in terms of thematic as well as technical devises. The novel's apparent modes and multifarious dimensions of meanings in fact, make it more complex and even stunning for the readers who approach Arun Joshi's fictional text with certain preoccupation apropos of his themes and techniques. The novel's thematic and modal complexity therefore, has given way to a variety of approaches and interpretations of the text. Shubra Mazumdar calls the novel "a commentary on the times" (1). Geeta Hariharan considers it as "a political parable" (2). T.Padma calls it "crypto-mythic and meta novel" (3), Brahma Dutta Sharma views it as 'a political novel" (4). Usha Bande approaches it through 'archetypal patterns" (5). The novel is also applauded for its allegorical dimensions. Some critics have also focussed on the historical dimensions of *The City and the River*. Some critics have attempted a synthesis of history and allegory. Kalyan Chatterjee for example in the essay 'More platitudinous than profound' puts it as "an allegory of Indian history and mythic truth" (6). G.S.Amur makes an insightful comment on the spatio-temporal context of the novel and also on the creative strategy of Arun Joshi. He
points out that the novel has a "temporal setting which is deliberately confused" (7).

The complexity of text certainly calls for multiple approaches and interpretations but most of the critics seem to have been carried away by either modal or technical variations or the thematic derivations. The novel, of course has a large canvas and projects highly complex vision that incorporates issues and problems that did not find manifestations in Joshi's earlier novels. Instead of an individual void, ennui or alienation the novel apparently seems to be taking into its creative account larger society and bigger socio-historical and political issues. The power politics, exploitative and corrupting influences seem to be at their best in the context of the text. Meaninglessness, absurdity and Godlessness loom large over the fictional locale. The novel therefore assumes epic dimensions and seems to be fictionally recording the war between two forces. The tension between the hostile powerful and helpless powerless and the resultant annihilation of peace and serenity and also of human dignity appear to be the creative and critical thrust of the novel. What is to be specially mentioned here is that Arun Joshi's creative concern with the themes of alienation and dispossession remain central in this novel also, although it is not as apparent and obvious as we find in his earlier novels like The Foreigner, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, The Apprentice and The Last Labyrinth.
Arun Joshi takes up the problems of alienation and dispossession for beyond the limited social and physical context of the individual. Alienation has often been defined as an estrangement from something or somebody but it should be remembered that it is also a 'condition of the mind' (8). Paul Tillich's observation is worth quoting here. He points out that 'man's entanglement in the world of existence alienates him from his rightful place in the world of essence and ideal forces' (9). The themes of alienation and dispossession in this novel function as a connecting thread that links all the event and order, disjunction and destruction, revision and degeneration. Alienation and dispossession in this novel function as a fulcrum on which the entire structure of the novel moves as the novel itself has the cyclic structure. The themes of alienation and dispossession therefore, are interlinked with spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of human existence. Man's call is self-evident of man's alienation from God and his dispossession of divine characteristics. All annihilation and destruction, exploitation and suppression, cruelties and tyrannies, spiritual decomposition and moral degeneration hover over the human world primarily because man is alienated from God, from the sustaining values and moral anchorage since these issues are universal in nature. A brief but careful analysis of The City and The River can surely bring out the centrality of alienation and dispossession in this text also. Arun Joshi has to take recourse to structural and technical devices and also to different fictional modes like allegory, parable and also to archetypal and mythic structure in order to authenticate his themes of alienation and dispossession.
The city and the River projects the relations of man with other men, with nature and with God, the ordering of loyalties towards man and towards God, the nature of the struggle of good against evil for its very survival and the progress of mankind through spirals of time operating through creation and disintegration. It is a novel that explores the very foundations of faith and right action.

The themes of human relationship with all its multiple dimensions, is also seriously taken up in some of his short stories. Human relationship, in fact, provides Arun Joshi with a larger arena of relationship like the relationship between man and man, man and society and finally between man and God. It has been pointed out that man’s alienation from God and Godly qualities invariably results in despair and dispossession. The short story, The Boy with the Flute exemplifies the statement. This story also like The City and the River employs fantasy as the governing mode that enriches the reality of man’s estrangement from God. It finally dawns upon Mr. Sethi the protagonist of the story, that God alone can save the man from eternal damnation and also save him from becoming a destitute.

The corrupting influence of money, what is called the ‘filthy lucre’ in modern parlance, and also the corrupting influence of ambition and power politics is illustriously embodied in other short stories like The Gherao and Kanyakumari. Kanyakumari presents a disconsolate vision
of India where the sun is yet to rise. Written in the first person narrative mode, the story reveals Arun Joshi’s intense social vision and makes a devastating comment on the post-Independence India with all its dreams shattered. The failure of the narrator protagonist to see the sunrise from the Vivekananda rock at Kanyakumari leads him to experience a greater disappointment with the country which is infested with unemployment, violent politics and corruption of all sorts, and is moving like a rudderless ship in a turbulent sea. It is an ironic repetition of the adventure of the Swami Vivekananda who attained his vision of a glorious India and also of God after his prolong meditation on sun-drenched rock at the farthest end of the sub-continent. The disappointed and disillusioned narrator presents his own predicament.

“..... I turned sharply to the east but there was no sign of the sun. A cloud hung on the horizon except that it was not a cloud. Nor was it a fog or mist. It was just a haze, a curtain through which you could not see. I thought may be I was in the wrong place. So, I ran up along the rock to the back of the temple. But there was no sun there either. Just the gray haze, a blanket. You could see nothing, not even a glow.” (p-217)

Arun Joshi’s use of legendary figure Swami Vivekananda as an extended symbol of piety, purity, selflessness, concern and commitment and also the use of other symbols, metaphors and images like, ‘sun’, ‘cloud’, ‘fog or mist’, ‘gray haze’, running ‘along the rock’ and ‘blanket’ deserve special attention. It is through this linguistic devices that Arun Joshi
sharply focuses on the missing dimensions of Indian society which craved for freedom and solidarity but unfortunately fallen a prey to negative forces. **The Gherao**, another short story also takes into its creative account the issues of education that becomes an arena of power display for the politicians and tycoons. This is an issue that Arun Joshi takes up in **The City and the River** on the larger level.

The story is like **The Home Coming** and **A Trip for Mr. Lele** project other important thematic concerns of Arun Joshi. These thematic concerns are glorification of power, a drive for money and materialism resulting in unbridled greed and tyranny that pave the way for disillusionment, alienation and dispossession. In **The Home Coming** the soldier has suffered the horrors of the war. But his return to the society horrifies him more when he discovers people eulogising war and strategic acrobatics on the battlefield, quite oblivious of the heart rendering, actualities of the war. Consequently he finds himself a misfit in the society, estranged and alienated. The story is a critique of the society that has gone stray and that sherry lacks selflessness, love or tolerance. One certainly needs to go beyond oneself, his ruthless ambition, his desires and dreams for cosiness and comforts of life. One therefore, has to reconcile with the reality of renunciation both literally and metaphorically. This is the major theme of **The Trip for Mr. Lele** where Mr. Lele sacrifices his desires for material prosperity and celebrates the birthday of his innocent daughter. Celebrations of mundane with purity and sincerity make the experience genuine and
authentic. This act of transcendence is more appealingly and convincingly taken up on the larger and fantastic canvas of the novel The City and the River.

Arun Joshi, in this novel goes beyond what he calls, the representation of apparent reality in his fiction. His own transcendence of the obvious and his creative stance vis à vis the apparent and invisible dimensions of the reality of human existence can best be presented in his own words. He asserts:

"life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark, mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun" (10).

This in fact can be applied to all of his novels. In The City and the River he works on a much vaster canvas which encompasses within its range, time, god, man and nature through an allegorical strategy.

The City and the River "are a mixture of fantasy, prophecy, and a startlingly real vision of everyday politics, ... that is truly a parable of times" (11). In his earlier novels too, Arun Joshi introduced fantasy and satire especially in the The Strange Case of Billy Biswas and The Apprentice. In these novels fantasy was incidental, but in The City and the River these constitute the basic fictional technique. There is a
deliberate mixture in The City and the River of the real and the imaginary. Arun Joshi takes his characters into no man's land, the past as well as the future. The device of parody or adaptations of life and literature are there. In the life of the Professor even the stars have their say. One of his little disciples that materialises from the sky is called the Little Star who had once been called Patanjali. The Little Star quotes that he is 'thousands of years old' (P-42). The raft sailing on the river has also on element of fantasy. It has no oars and no boatmen but it sails on with the tune of music. Master Bhoma's disappearance is held up to be a mystery because "this man simply disappeared between his house and the first lock-up" (p-44). The truth is that master Bhoma simply walks away when the jeep carrying him strikes against a pole.

There are several other fantastic references in The City and the River. Bhoma's parable of the weaving of the invisible clothing for the king and the king's putting it on in a special festival are also effective constituents of fantasy. Everyone sees that the astrologer wore no fabric and that the king put on no robes, yet nobody except a child, dare comment that the king is naked. Dharma's father, standing before a mirror, sees that his "inside are rotting" (P-133). Even the doctor advises him to "exercise your soul. Take it for walks" (P-134). The scroll containing the city's horoscope has also muddling up of the actual and the impossible. There is much debate regarding the interpretation of the illogicality of "the river, I see, from a teacher rise":
"A hundred years ago, as young students, the Astrologer and the Hermit had long debated this particular parallelogram. Their dispute had cantered on a single line. Where the Hermit, read 'The river, I see, from a teacher rise', the Astrologer maintained "A teacher, I see, from the river rise".

They had disputed that line endlessly. They had sought their teacher's interpretation, but the Great Yogeshwara had merely smiled. Finally, one day he had said, 'Cities my children, even as men, make their own horoscope'. They had pressed him for more but that was all that he would say" (P-217).

Arun Joshi is not alone in using the technique of fantasy in his novel. There has been a growing "trend towards fantasy in post-war writing", John Holloway goes on to explain:

"One can, of course, identify fantasy writing earlier in the century. But its prominence and importance over present period is new, and in all allegedly great age of technological advance and materialist preoccupation this is a remarkable fact" (12).

The novel opens with Prologue and ends with Epilogue. In between the two it has nine chapters narrating the rule of the Grand
Master, his becoming King, the perpetuation of the reign of terror, people’s rebellion, the declaration of an Era of Ultimate Greatness, the repressive measures adopted by the king, and lastly, the destruction of the city with the great flood. The earlier novels of Arun Joshi are mostly written in the first person narrative mode. The City and the River is told from the omniscient point of view. The issue of the quest for the self, roles and responsibilities, possession and dispossession, alienation and integrity of inter-relatedness and spiritual authenticity and the questions of restraining conscriptions and fatal forces and also the problems of freedom, will and choice are incorporated in the larger allegorical context of the text. The intrinsic necessity of the thematic concerns here also calls for a shift in the narrative point of view. Prologue and Epilogue inform us of the narrative strategy of the novel. The Great Yogeshwara is an ageless seer and teacher at whose feet several persons of the novel such as Astrologer, the Minister for Trade and the Hermit of the Mountain have also received education. The agelessness of the teacher is borne up by the fact that “a hundred years ago, as young students, the Astrologer and the Hermit had long debated this particular parallelogram” (P-217). Both of the disciples have crossed much more than a century of their lives and their teacher, the Great Yogeshwara, must have been almost ageless’. The Prologue tells us about the last day of Nameless – One with the Great Yogeshwara. The Great Yogeshwara celebrates his pupil’s thirtieth birthday by revealing to him who he is. Moreover, he points out to him: “the mystery of the world and how to "keep the grain and the chaff apart” (P-10). The Great Yogeshwara also teaches him the secret of the
body and that of the spirit and how the spirit gained the control of the body. He also teaches his pupil the way of the pilgrim and the way of the warrior, cautions him about: “the ways of the tyrant” (P-10) and how to wait. The Great Yogeshwar teaches him everything but tells him nothing about who he is. The Great Yogeshwara reads out something from a book of yellowed sheets, containing: “a strange, sorry tale” (P-10). To celebrate his thirtieth birthday the teacher offers him elixir which is: “the colour of the peacock’s feathers” (P-11). It makes the nameless – one aware of the music and the dance prevailing in the infinite spaces of the cosmic night and he feels: “as vast as the sky and as tall as the mountain” (P-11). The teacher is satisfied that his disciple also sees the dancing of a God and then he tells him:

“I shall tell you now a tale and in my telling, perhaps, you will know who you are. Listen, this is how it goes” (P-11).

The narrative of the novel is followed in about two hundred and fifty pages describing The City and the River. This is crowned by Epilogue beginning with the question posed by the Nameless – One: “and then what happened” (P-261). The Great Yogeshwara then goes on to tell him of the fate of the periodic disintegration and regeneration of the city and its different activities. All this has happened thirty year ago when the Nameless-One, an illegal child, had been placed on a raft floating on the river. The Great Yogeshwara himself comes by him and not only rears him up but also educates him. In Epilogue, the Great
Yogeshwar sends him back to the city in the same raft which had taken him to the Great Yogeshwar. The Great Yogeshwara tells the Nameless-One of the “endless repetition and periodic disintegration” (P-262) but cautions him that “to achieve that we need purity” (P-262). The sage means thereby that he should purify himself: “of egoism, selfishness, and stupidity” (P-262). Its acquisition is a question of trying: “but purity can come only through sacrifice” (P-262). By way of telling him who he is, the Great Yogeshwar teaches him that: “God resides as much in a Grand Master as in you and me” (P-263). The sage also promises to him that he would be with him as an instrument: ‘of the great God in the highest heaven who is the Master of the Universe” (P-264). The Nameless-One in his journey to the city finds a casket of burnished brass containing within a prophesy which had also been there with the previous city and which had been a topic of much debate by the Great Yogeshwara’s former disciples. Regarding the fate of the city, the Great Yogeshwar elaborates:

“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 also 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. To someone this replay,
this repetition of things, might appear as a charade, a joke. But, then, whoever said the good Lord did not have humour” (P-262).

Prologue and Epilogue bring out the cyclic motion of the novel. Usha Bande rightly compared it with T.S.Eliot’s lines in The Four Quartets:

“In my beginning is my end. In succession. Houses rise and fall, crumble are extended, Are removed, destroyed, restored” (13).

Prologue and Epilogue tell nothing palpable or concrete about the narrative but these prepare us for the interpretation of the novel as a whole. The paragraph quoted from the text is related to the continuation of: “the psychic march of humanity” (14) in which a new city is reborn like the phoenix on the ruins of the old” (15).

The City and the River are two opposing symbols in the novel. Both the palace Astrologer who is the mentor of the Grand Master and the Hermit of the Mountain who identifies himself with the river and the river populace are the disciples of the Great Yogeshwara. But they make different choices so they turn into adversaries. Again, the prophecy about the advent of a king that sets the wheel of action in motion, is interpreted differently by the two each according to his nature. The delicate balance between the city and the river is disturbed by the
different choices made by the Grand Master and the boatmen. In fact, it is the city's estrangement and alienation from the river and all that it stands for that leads to its destruction and death of its rulers.

The river is a physical presence and a symbolic reality. The people who live near the river are called Boatmen who are opposing to the rulers of the city. They offer their allegiance to the river, which is for them: "a symbol of the divine mother. Of God Himself" (P-22). The great river is "Time's consort and Time itself" (P-61). The river is both a preserver and a destroyer. There is a very cordial relation between the boatmen and the river. The river has great sympathy for those who revere her she speaks to those who are pure and innocent. The Hermit hears the river speaking to him. Professor had heard the river when he was the student:

"He was sitting on the same granite pillar one night lost as to the purpose of his life when the river had spoken to him and told him to look. He had looked and seen, as though for the first time, the stars and the planets wheeling in the high heavens. And the river had whispered "Isn't it this that you want? Something like me, peaceful and infinite and free?" (P-29).

The Grand Master tries to crush the boatmen's protest and destroy them. The river in its anger washes away the rulers completely. Consequently the city is destroyed and the river flows silently to remind the readers the insignificance of man in the face of vastness of universe. The river
becomes as aptly remarks G.S. Amur: “A source of ultimate realization and the symbolic anchor of man’s tranquillity” (16).

The city, another important aspect of the novel, spread along the river bank, has a three-tier structure:

“First comes the narrow brown band of the mud huts, running from end to end, dotted with the green of many mangroves. Next ... on a higher ground, lies the neat rosy pink oval of the brick colonies and their special schools, clubs, shopping arcades. Beyond the brick colonies stand the famous Seven Hills ranged in their picturesque formation” (P-12).

Seven Hills are the seat of the Grand Master’s government. Deep under the Seven Hills are the Gold Mines, the state prison. It is a huge dungeon where prisoners are ruthlessly tortured:

“When a vanished one enters the Gold Mines he enters the domain of permanent night. If this unnatural state disturbs him initially he soon comes to accept it. For those whose resistance runs high or who have too high an idea of themselves there are means at the disposal of the administrator, and men trained in the use of those means, that ensure such resistance is quickly overcome, the idea of the self suitably dissolved” (P-161).
The city looks unnatural. There is complete absence of vegetation and flowers. It looks like T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*. "Freeless and without flowers" (P-31), 'the palace lawns, however, leave much to be desired. All brown and yellow. No trees, No flowers, Not a patch of green' (P-31). Flowers bloom along the banks of the river and in the mango-grooves. But in:

"the city's newly laid parks and along its well-straightened avenues and on the Seven Hills ... in spite of the chief horticulturist's strenuous efforts and to the Grand Master's great regret, neither grass nor flowers grow" (136).

In such an atmosphere people tend to suffer from weariness, rootlessness, boredom, meaninglessness and alienation.

The population of the city is divided into three sections: the mud-quarters inhabited by the boatmen who are also known as Nameless, the brick house people who provide the city with administrators and intellectuals; and the actual rulers of the city whose abode is Seven Hills. The boatmen whose allegiance is for the river are most tortured ones. The city's administration is run by the Grand Master who is a dictator. The Grand Master establishes on Advisory council known as "The Council of the Friends of the People" that consists of the palace Astrologer, the Minister for Trade, the Education Adviser, the Police
Commissioner and the Master of Rallies. Everybody has allegiance to Grand Master: "to remain in the limelight and improve their hierarchical standing in the administrative ranking system" (17). The Grand Master is not much worried about brick-people and the mud-people, because they can be "cajoled, distracted, and if necessary, threatened" (P-13). Grand Master considers the boatmen most disobedient and stubborn. They work for themselves and not for any other. They do not respect the Grand Master. The Grand Master’s father had advised him:

"Boatmen are not as simple as they seem. They consider themselves to be the children of the river, and to the river, and river alone do they hold allegiance. They believe unfortunately, with their hearts, and for their beliefs they are willing to die. And don’t let their poverty mislead you into believing that they can be bought" (P-14).

The boatmen are hard workers. The revenue of the city depends on their work. All the important activities are done by them. They oppose to any move to absorb them in the hierarchical social structure of the city. They want to maintain their separate identity though the authorities insist to absorb them in the main stream of the city’s hierarchy. They are very happy and peaceful, their way of life which is anti-materialistic and spiritual overtones.
The Grand Master is handsome and courteous. He works only in night. He does not like music. His dislike for music is surprising because he has: “the sweetest, the most hypnotic voice in the city” (P-48). He wants to become an unchallenged ruler of the city. He has a dream in which he is seated on a throne on a hill surrounded by the waters of a river, and the music of the boatmen’s one-string in the background proves a failure. The Grand Master’s elation is followed by panic as he watches a lot of naked men coming from the river and climbing the hill towards his throne, their nakedness tightening “like a noose” (P-15) around his throne and choking him to death. The dream shows the Grand Master’s possessiveness and rising of the naked boatmen from the river to challenge his authority. He wants from boatmen “total and unquestioned allegiance” (P-57). The dream highlights evil in him:

“Thus the dream had merely upturned the top layers of his consciousness and revealed to him what his heart in its secret aspirations already felt, that he was the chosen of the lord to rule his city” (P-57).

In the Epigraph to the novel, there is a prophecy of a king who would arrive. The prophecy does not mention who would be the king. It is open to discussion. But palace Astrologer encourages the Grand Master to work towards becoming the king. The Astrologer starts measures to force the people to surrender and show their allegiance to the Grand Master. A new era called “the Era of Ultimate Greatness” (P-23) is
declared to create fear of the palace among the people. The boatmen do
not like these measures of forcing them for allegiance to the Grand
Master. The boatmen do not at any cost, want to swear allegiance to any
human being. Bhumiputra – a mathematics teacher spearheads the
protest against the Grand Master. General anger is spread and effigies of
the Astrologer are burnt. State comes into action and protesters are
arrested and dumped in the Gold Mines. The authorities take every
oppressive measure to crush the rebellion of the boatmen and force them
to accept the Grand Master their ruler.

Bhumiputra starts narrating the parable of the naked king to his
classes and his narration attracts a lot of students:

"By the end of the two weeks the whole place was talking
about Master Bhoma’s parable. “The king is naked”
became a slogan, a cry of revolt. One morning an entire
wall was found decorated with it. It appeared on
blackboards and in toilets. The authorities started receiving
letters that on being opened contained nothing more than a
sheet of art paper. “The king is naked” calligraphed neatly
on either side. At the end of the fortnight, the staff
secretary called Bhoma and told him to stop preaching his
parable or face serious consequences” (P-154).
Bhoma wants to discontinue his recital. But his cowardice makes him feel ashamed. He meets the Hermit. The Hermit asks Bhoma to continue his recital for the sake of the people in general.

“You have been chosen to speak. The great river has chosen you to speak with the tongue of men what they cannot hear in her troubled lament. . . . . Having spoken, you will feel lighter. The weight shall dissolve, the shackles fall” (P-153-54).

The Hermit tells Bhoma that to realize knowledge into action, one must choose between fear and liberation. Such a choice is great. If one is not making this choice, he will be driven to bondage, stagnation and dispossession. The Hermit also tells Bhumiputra that the men like Grand Master are insignificant and greedy.

“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 who is the master of all men, including the Grand Master, and it is His will that men follow in every way” (P-156).

Bhoma continues his recitals. The Grand Master is afraid of Bhoma’s recitals. He arrests Bhoma for fear of a possible revolt. But Bhoma manages to escape.
Professor who is an astronomer and respected by all sections of people takes up the job of Bhome. He teaches astronomy to the city’s youth in the day and at nights he searches through his telescope the galaxies and the planets. He is engrossed in his study and does not know the world outside. He does not know the recent developments in the city, the Astrologer’s Three Truths and the New Era. He is disturbed with the news of Bhumipurtra’s arrest and disappearance.

"His balance had been upset because the event did not reconcile with the laws that, according to his beliefs, underlay the working of the universe... How could men vanish without explanation if stars did not?.... To the Professor the vanishing of Master Bhome was no different from the unexplained disappearance of a star of the heavens". (P-45-46).

The professor in his quest get help from a mysterious character called the Little Star, a brown boy of ten or eleven years. In his search of Bhome, the Professor experiences the city’s corruption and cowardice of intellectuals and bureaucrats who do not dare to speak against the Grand Master. The Professor fails to know the whereabouts of Bhome.

The prophecy is interpreted differently by different people. The Astrologer interprets it in favour of the Grand Master. He reads in the prophecy that it is fate that determines human life and action, a fate that
chooses Grand Master as the city’s sovereign ruler. The Hermit of the mountain has his own views about prophecy.

"The prophecy, however, did not subscribe to such inexorable laws of fate and left the matter open. It had been drawn in fact by a hand that only believed in the great law of Karma under which men and cities by their own hand, survived or died" (P-65).

Minister for trade who is politically ambitious insists on knowing the secret of the prophecy. The Hermit explains:

"There is nothing inevitable about the prophecy. The hand that made it believes, above all, in man’s capacity to change his fate. So even if it speaks of the coming of a king, men can so conduct themselves, so choose, that the king does not come. Or the king that comes is of the right kind" (P-68).

The explanation lays emphasis on man’s capacity to change his fate, to choose the circumstances in which he must live and also on right choice and right action. People are free to disprove the prophecy and for that they have to choose the truth, purify themselves and make sacrifices. Man must gain mastery over him and overcome his fear and selfish desires. He must cleanse his soul before receiving the vision of truth. But
knowledge of truth and its realization in action are different things. The Minister of Trade hypocrisy and selfishness argues with the Hermit:

“That is where the rub lies in action where one should raise standards of rebellion, one foolishly seeks compromises where one ought to call a spade a spade, and one merely stays dumb and hopes for the best. Where is the cure Great Hermit?” (P-69).

The Hermit says the ‘cure’ is “within oneself”. No external force can help them. One must depend on oneself. He also says that everything in the world is governed by the law of the Master who controls all.

The professor continues his search for Bhoma. He decides to broadcast to the city the truth about Master Bhoma and the sin of the seven hills. Little Star, Shailaja’s brother and the Professor open a lottery stall and begin to recite the parable of the naked king. The boatmen enjoy the story of the Grand Master and his sycophants. Fearing rebellion the Grand Master orders arrest of the Professor, Shailaja’s brother and the Headman and send to the Gold Mines.

The lottery stall is destroyed. A ‘dragnet’ is set in motion to subdue the resistance of the boatmen who refuse to take the Astrologer’s oath and transfer their allegiance from the river to the ruler. The Professor is shocked. He starts fast unto death in protest against the torture on the
headman when she refuses to take the Astrologer’s oath. The Professor dies in the Gold Mines the Grand Master fails to see the real significance of the Professor’s self-sacrifice. His failure to see the truth and to choose leads the city to the destruction.

The Grand Master with the help of the Rallies Master and his men start humiliating the boatmen. They forget their ‘Dharma’ and start crushing poor and helpless people. They do not uphold the truth. They obey the Grand Master for fear of humiliation and persecution. They (Rallies Master and his men) forget that submission to the external authority in defiance of the dictates of their true selves result in degeneration, corruption and alienation. The officers suppress their conscience and follow the dictates of the Grand Master and consequentially, they are alienated and dispossessed not only from the oppressed citizens but also from their true authentic selves and also of the true sense of being human. The arrest of the headman brings the feeling of dejection and dispossession to boatmen. “They were like orphans in an evil world”. (P-144). A sense of despair and alienation overtake their spirit. Bhumiputra returns to the city. He had disappeared because of the New Era. He narrates his experience to the Hermit:

“Wherever I went the shadow was there I felt its cold grip on my heart and on the hearts of other men. Finally, I want to the mountain and climbed. One day I came to a valley of flowers and the shadow was behind me.....One day I
thought I would move to the higher regions, perhaps to the Yogeshwara’s hermitage itself. But, then the night before the morning I was to move I felt a force...as is a living presence, and this force, this presence seemed to turn my face toward this city once again and seemed to say that it was the city and not the hermitage that would be the stage for the play of my life and that needed to be the goal of my travels”. (P-143).

Like Sindi Oberoi in The Foreigner, Bhumiputra finds the meaning of life not in renunciation and escape but in action and involvement. His experience has turned him from a timid and vacillating teacher into a dedicated man of action. At the advice of the Hermit, he agrees to help the boatmen against the Grand Master’s rule. He energizes the boatmen by reminding them that they are the children of the sacred river. The boatmen reaffirm their allegiance to the river. Bhumiputra becomes their leader. Every evening he goes from one hamlet to another encouraging the boatmen by his recital of the parable of the naked king and “many other tales that spoke of wisp-life rulers that had once danced upon the earth but danced no more”. (P-147) under his guidance the boatmen launch a campaign for the release of the headmen. When they fail in their efforts, they go on strike.

The Grand Master is not deterred by the strike of the boatmen. Political equations changes when the ‘shock-brigade’ of the education
adviser offers unconditional support to the boatmen who accept it much against Bhumiputra’s advice. Violence enters into non-violent movement.

“The boatmen watched in amazement as, with breathtaking swiftness, the shock-brigades converted their strike into a general uprising. Within hours the uprising spread from the great river to the pyramids. Shops, schools, buses, telephone exchanges and railway stations were systematically burnt” (P-182).

Bhma is worried about the violence and useless destruction of property. But the headmen eager to avenge the Professor’s death, supports violence. Revolt of the boatmen and discontent among the adviser prompt the Grand Master to take stern action. The events quickly take a turn as the Grand Master realizes his dream of becoming the city’s King in a secret meeting of his confidants. The King appoints the Minister for Trade as the new Grand Master of the city.

The prophecy comes true as the Hermit’s efforts to make the King see himself and choose the truth, fails. A dangerous battle is fought between the boatmen and the King’s army. In the battle, the boatmen, Bhumiputra and all those who support him, died. Before his death, the Hermit performs his last Yajna:

“Just as the Hermit ended his Yajna the sun rose lighting up the vast expanse of the river... High above the palace,
the pyramids, the Seven Hills, the peak glowed pink and yellow and, finally, a blinding white that no human eye could stand” (P-249).

The river triumphs in the end. The deluge that follows the destruction of the river’s embankment and the incessant rain turns the river into “an ancient sea, like the sea that had first condensed on the whirling planet a billion years ago” (P-257). It sweeps the entire city including the Seven Hills and the pyramids. Those who want to be king and force people’s loyalty to the river, fight to resist it, are dead. The authoritarian regime ends. The King notices in the river “his own shadow and the shadows of his father and grand father”, (P-259) and painfully realizes that these shadows are all: “that time would permit him to leave behind” (P259). The wheel of Karma, the human cycle of birth, disintegration and death, unrolls. In a historical ending, the cycle begins again:

“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 also another Council and another set of Councillors. Then men have other names but the forces they embody remain unchanged.
The city is set for yet another conflict between the forces representing politics and religion over the issue of allegiance, "to God or to man" (P-262). The solution seems in what Yogeshwara says to the Nameless-One:

"The main thing is to prevent this endless repetition, this periodic disintegration... The city must strive once again for purity. But purity can come only through sacrifice. That perhaps was the meaning of the boatmen's rebellion" (P-262-63).

Salvation from tyranny and oppression and egress from the endless cycle of becoming can, thus be found in the purification of the soul, sacrifice complete effacement of ego, and a total surrender to a higher consciousness beyond oneself. The Divine, the image of God that dwells in the innermost being of all men expresses itself in the infinite capacity for self-transcendence. Every man has freedom to rise and fall and his future is in his own hands. He must exercise this freedom of choice consciously with full knowledge of its consequences, since whatever he does affects not only him but also others. Being a man he justifies his actions. He must overcome fear, cowardice and selfish desire which stand between him and his knowledge of truth. For realization of truth, man must rise above himself, forget his petty concerns and have the courage to translate his knowledge into action.
Men indulge in selfish desires and bring suffering not only on others but also on themselves. Self-centeredness, over arching leads to ambition, tyranny and corruption and finally to lead to the disintegration of the self and the nation at large. Men like the Grand Master forget their true nature and cherish illusions. Suffering from spiritual bankruptcy, the Grand Master tries to secure the allegiance of the people and dictate over the city. Under his authoritarian rule, the city becomes corrupt, dispossessed and alienated from the river that symbolically represents all that is positive, regenerative and divine.

The revolt of boatmen is to purify the city. For the sake of allegiance to the river, the boatmen are ready to face any consequence. For their ideals, they face suffering and death. They are anti-materialistic and continue their struggle. Innocent and pure in heart, they turn their rebellion into a ‘Yajna’ under the guidance of the Hermit and Bhumiputra. In a sacrificial spirit they dedicate their lives and deeds to the service of the river and even accept death, so that the city may grow and purify. If the Grand Master could rise above meanness and greed and discern the uprising in the right way, he could have saved the city and its people. Since the struggle fails due to the obstinacy of the Grand Master who refuses to confront himself in the mirror of his consciousness and overcome his self-cantered ego, another attempt is required. The Nameless-One, the chosen of the river, is to lead this resistance. The cycle of Karma will move on until the divine scheme is fulfilled, the city and the people are purified and ascend into spiritual existence. Since the
ideas of God are worked out through human instrumentality – the Great Yogeshwara says to the Nameless-One:

"In any case we are only instrument – both you and I – of the great God in the highest heaven who is the Master of the Universe. How perfect we are as instruments is all that matters. His is the will, His is the force. But I shall be with you always" (P-264).

The city and the people must choose and make themselves perfect through sufferings and sacrifice. It is the men like Professor and Bhumiputra through their self sacrifice, force the choice more finely on the consciousness of the rulers. The sages like Yogeshwara and the Hermit, who are spiritually stronger serve as the instruments of God and bring Him to the people. The struggle for perfection is painful and sometimes, devastating. But should not dishearten. The struggle and suffering of the people will touch the Grand Master’s soul and their lives will be transformed. The purification of their souls will lead to the purification of cities and nations, and tyranny will come to an end through non-violent means. Until this happens, men must continue their efforts.

The City and the River is more optimistic than Arun Joshi’s earlier novels. Joshi is optimistic that ‘all should be well’ (P-29) that ‘there is a season for everything’ (p-114), and ‘Time will settle things’ (P-218). The
novel's appeal lies in Arun Joshi's clever handling of the material - the eternal conflict between men and power and the human quest for perfection. Githa Hariharan aptly remarks:

"As a parable of political society - the endless variations of the relationship between men and power - The City and the River is honest, ironic and rewarding" (18).

Githa Hariharan brilliantly analyses the fictional modes in terms of parable of power and politics. She also throws light on the other fictional devices like irony and satire that make the novel a more appealing and authentic record of the intricacies involved in power politics. But if we carefully look at the trajectory of Arun Joshi's creative consciousness it becomes clear that The City and the River is much more than the simplistic version of the corruption and annihilation that power politics ruthlessly brings upon on mankind. In terms of the progression of an artist this novel clearly reveals Arun Joshi's transcendence of merely political or his preoccupation with the self that is often a divided, or a fragmented self or a lost self. The novel clearly establishes that 'faith' is the solitary means of redemption for man. The tempting/corrupting influences of the society and culture and, the narcissistic will of the self should either be curtailed or simply done away with if the self, who is continually in exile because of his alienation from the divine design, has to arrive somewhere for ever. This creative stance of Arun Joshi becomes quite obvious in his employment of the allegorical modes. Characters in
the novel embody forces that betray the struggle between the demonic and the divine. Alienated from God man is absolutely dispossessed and finally becomes a victim of the negative and life-thwarting forces that lead him to spiritual decomposition and moral disintegration. Going beyond the self in its ultimate analysis, is the accomplishment of the self.
References:


11. The Blurb to The City and the River (Orient Paperbacks, 1994).
15. Ibid.