In his political novel ‘The City and the River,’ Arun Joshi presents the malpractices in which people wielding political power indulge and the ways in which people respond to them. Taxonomically speaking, the malpractices presented here are of two kinds: the malpractices presented here are of retain power and the malpractices resorted in order to eliminate dissent. The responses of the victims range from total surrender to uncompromising resistance.

So far as the malpractices resorted in order to acquire and retain political power presented here are concerned, the first of these is the malpractice of manipulating people and incidents in order to lift oneself to the apex by giving the impression that one is very popular and that it is the people who want to have power. The Grand Master, the ruler in the novel, organized rallies in his support to give the impression that he is loved by his subjects and he makes the Master of Trade propose in the meeting of the “Supreme Council” that he be a king, and argue that it is in the interest of the people, rather than that of the Grand Master. The following words of the Master of Trade:
I shall briefly put forward certain criteria that the king of the city should meet. First, as already decided, 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...now a gentleman; the only person who meets these criteria is our beloved Grand Master. I propose, therefore, that he requested to accept the onerous burdens of the king's high office.  

Another malpractice, in which a person wielding political power indulges, as presented in ‘The City and the River,’ is that he tries to ensure that his descendant succeeds him. In this novel, the Rallies Master to organize rallies also for the Grand Master’s son so that people may gather the impression that he too has endeared himself to the masses, as the Rallies Master tells the journalist: “And now, journalist, I must gather rallies not only for the Grand Master but also for his son as well. The city must face its final humiliation and I must be instrument to it.” (76) The Astrologer is the Grand Master’s tool in the novel and advances attractive arguments in order to justify the perpetuation of the rule of a family when he argues:

The sacred and mysterious has shown us the light and we have unanimously concluded that the Grand Master must immediately request his son to help him maintain the Dharma Rajya that he established. We know what we are asking. We know we are
asking for great sacrifice. No sacrifice is greater than the sacrifice from a family that has for a hundred years sacrificed its men, its women, its children, its wealth, it’s very all for the sake of this city. They have suffered endless privation just so that this city might of and we have no doubt that the Grand Master will listen to our pleadings. The city needs his son and he must give him to us. (101)

Here the narrator is satirizing the efforts to give power to a man under the pretension that he is obliging the country by agreeing to get power. The attack is overt in the following remark of the Minister for Trade:

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 mischiefs. (111)

Another political malpractice in the novel is the ruler’s making people regard himself as the nation. In the novel the Astrologer identifies the Grand Master with the river that is the symbols of the ruler and the nation respectively, when he says to the Headman:

Do not bring the Great Yogeshwara into this, Headman. All I ask is that you also swear to the Grand Master. He and the great river are one. (164)
His words remind us of the assertion that Louis XIV of France made, viz, that he himself was the state. Another malpractice presented here is one of keeping oneself in the seat of power with the help of guns and thus using the Army and the Police, which are expected to protect the state from external and internal aggressions, in order to protect oneself from even the dissenters. The logic that is advanced in order to justify the mischievous approach lies embodied in the following arguments of the commissioner of the Professor:

If you ask me, the New Era is not enough. What we need is a violent clean-up.
But the people too might become violent?
The people do not have the guns. Only we can afford guns, not that we should use them (for anything other than securing justice for the poor.)
But the whole city is poor, the Professor pointed out. That is why need more guns. The might sound absurd but the fact is that the poorer a city is the more guns its government needs. (82)

There also comes a time when the Police use guns to eliminate opposition, nay even people who are staging a peaceful sit-in. The narrator reports:

Then all exists were barred from outside and all lights were switched off. For the next two minutes the machine guns sprayed the pitch dark hall with bullets…at the end of the two minutes the lights were switched on and the gunners were given another two minutes to finish their job. (184-85)
The novelist also shows the ruler indulging in the malpractice of giving ministerial posts of persons for political reasons rather than for their talents and capabilities. For instance, the post of the Education Adviser has been given in the novel to a person who has won the support of students and teachers, whose support the Grand Master wants to win, and talent or capability is not taken into consideration at all. The boy tells the Professor: “When the Grand Master inaugurated the New Era the Astrologer advised him to appoint the Education Adviser to the Council. That was the only way of keeping his stock-brigades from joining hands with the boatmen.” (35-36) Giving posts for political reasons is likely to encourage politics rather than bring efficiency in the administration.

The narrator in the novel also mentions an occurrence which evidences that according to the novelist public funds are misused by some rulers to gratifies the needs, the wishes or even the whims of their near and dear ones, rather than meet the needs of people. In this novel, the road called the Avenue Great River is straightened because the Grand Master’s wife wants it to be so for no reason other than one of having a nicer view as she says: “How much nicer would the view be if there were a straight road running from here to the river.” (37) Even though this involves making people living there lose their homes and hearths. It is sheer tyranny to deprive people of their
homes and hearths only to make the view look nice to the ruler’s wife! Views do matter, no doubt, but they do not matter more than home and hearths.

These efforts are made by rulers to persuade people to continue tolerating poverty in the name of leading a life of spiritualism has been shown in the novel when the people who have been deprived of their homes and hearths are exhorted to accept poverty on the ground that they belong to a country, the civilization of which is spiritual rather than material, as if spiritual civilization failed to provide people even homes and hearths! The narrator reports:

The Astrologer issued an order next day authorizing the homeless to carry on living on the sports where they had their homes as though their homes were still there. The Although attitude, his orders said, was fundamental to spiritual civilization like ours, where even kings had preferred the purity of the forest to the suffocation of palaces. No doubt there would be initial inconvenience but, in the long run, all was bound to work out the best. (37)

The novelist uses spiritualism is being used as a narcotic to keep people homeless and reminds one of the religions, which, as Karl Marx put it, was made to work as opium. Another political malpractice hinted at in the novel is the authorities’ manipulating the prices and the traded of commodities in order to earn money for the state or for oneself. It is this malpractice that
has been hinted at in the following piece of conversation between Pinstripe and the Minister for Trade: Pinstripe went on:

In the light of the approaching Festival of the River cooking oil can bring in excellent revenues. Princes can be pushed very high if the produce of the Gold Mines is cornered. I shall do what I can do. (64)

A government needs money, no doubt, but its role is different from that of a trader. Yet another political malpractice presented here is the ruler’s declaring that people’s demands will be accepted even when he has no intention to implement the decree and, thus, cheating people. The malpractice has been employed when the Grand Master instructs the Astrologer to issue a decree but not to think of implementing it. The fact comes to light when we read:

Yes, Astrologer, let us decree that all prisoners shall be told their crimes, or, set free.
Issuing a decree, Astrologer, does not mean its immediate implementation. (167-68)

The ruler who makes announcements of this kind is a cheat rather than a statesman. The malpractices employed by a ruler in order to eliminate dissent, as presented in the novel, are again various. One of them is using coercion in order to frighten people into loyalty. In this novel, a large number
of boatmen are sent to prison only because they refuse to declare that they are loyal to the Grand Master. The narrator reports:

A decree from the palace announced the beginning of a new era to be known as ‘The Era of Ultimate Greatness.’ It enjoined on the people to beware of the enemy within and the enemy without and reminded them of the Astrologer’s There Beatitudes. The new era was inaugurated with the arrest of a boatman and a clown. The boatman’s wife had borne an illegal child. The clown was arrested because he had been heard to laugh when the old boatman was being put in chains. (23)

The narrator is laughing at the ways of this ruler as there is no point in arresting a boatman for his wife’s arrested for having cuckolded her husband. Likewise, a clown is there only to make people laugh and so there is no point in arresting a clown for laughing. Moreover, laughing is an innocent exercise and one indulging in its does not deserve any punishment. The Commissioner tells his subordinates:

The boatmen have spurned the Astrologer’s three Truths that they have ridiculed him, calling him a pompous fool; and have, indeed, burnt his effigies along the banks of the river. (24)

It is evident that the boatmen are arrested not because to take have committed any crime but because they have refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Grand Master and have raised a voice of dissent against the
Grand Master’s hypocritical announcement of the beginning of ‘The Era of Ultimate Greatness.

Another such malpractice presented here is one of restricting the freedom of the press and not letting any independent newspaper flourish. It is this state of affairs that prevails in the Grand Master’s ‘City’ in the novel. The fact has been brought to light by the little Star who informs the Professor:

There are two newspapers in this city. One of them is owned by a trust of which the Astrologer is the head, the other is owned by a girl. The girl is five years old and cannot manage a newspaper. The Master of Rallies manages it for her. The Master of Rallies also controls the satellite. The satellite controls the radio and the video. The Master of Rallies controlled the satellite on the Grand Master’s behalf because the satellite is the private property of the Grand Master. (88)

It is almost impossible for people trying to find facts through the newspaper and the radio to find them in a country where such a situation is prevailing. Here people can know only the establishment version of facts. Since most people are too credulous to distrust the press and the radio, they are misled into accepting the establishment version and taking fiction as fact. In the novel, the Grand Master and his men are successful in spreading the fiction that Master Bhoma has hatched a conspiracy to unseat the Grand Master. The press is further restricted in the novel by forcing newsman not to use their papers against persons when the Rallies Master tells Vasu:
Unless his underground daily, The Rumblings ceased publication or changed its tune before the Festival of the River, which was only a month away, he would be expelled from the journalists’ guild and the businessmen and the little girl who owned the newspaper would be instructed not to give him employment. (74)

Another malpractice adopted to discourage dissent is that of harassing the dissenters and causing them inconveniences in one form or another. It is this malpractice that has been highlighted in the novel when the Grand Master gets the boatman’s musical instruments destroyed only because he himself antipathy to music. (48)

Yet another such malpractice is that of creating a phobia of external and internal threats. It is the malpractice which the Astrologer uses when he is trying to argue the latter into silence and says:

It seems to me, Headman; you have come here only to counter me word for word. Nor does it mean the very existence of the city is in danger. (21)

He uses it even in his public speech when he says: “In the darkness of night there has come a new wave of deadly assassins. Daggers in hand they have crept of their holes. They stalk the night, determined to strike at the very root of our lives, at the very heart of the man whose heartbeat of the city itself.” (99) A barbarous malpractice adopted here in order to suppress dissent is one of disabling the dissenters. This malpractice has taken the form of
blinding the Headman, the lady chief of the boatmen. The incident has been reported by the narrator in the following words: “During the night the guards pierced the Headman’s eyes with long pointed needles and poured acid into the perforations.” (164)

Still another political malpractice to discourage dissent presented here is that of the ruler's trying to restrict the growth of the population of the section of people who are not loyal to him. The Grand Master tries to freeze the population of the boatmen, as they are politically so conscious that “the slightest excuse they raise rebellious standards.” (15-16) He says through the Headman:

You think an ant is born on this earth without God's will? 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." (19-20).

The Headman gives one more argument against the policy of population control: “Is it not true, Astrologer, that the city's granaries are full? And is it not a fact that out of the mud people the city shall always extract work equal to what if feeds them, even as it is done to the animals?” (20) One may have reservations while agreeing to accept these arguments, but one cannot justify efforts to restrict the growth of one single who is supported by the majority of the citizens is very likely to encourage the rulers to try to speed up the growth of their men and to restrict the population of the dissenters and
sooner or later the group manipulating the growth of the population of the
country or even of the world, irrespective of principles, is likely to come to
power and hold it.

One more political malpractice to discourage dissent adopted here is
that of laying the blame for every unhappy incident at the dissenter’s door
irrespective measures and, thus, tries to direct edge of people’s anger
towards the dissenters. The fact comes to light when one finds the Grand
Master blaming every boatman for his having been used the Police and the
Army against the latter: “He forces us to beat him with sticks and fired bullets
and lasers into him. He forces us to call out the Army.” (58) The novelist is
ironical here and is laughing at the wrong-doer’s blaming the victim for the
wrongs heaped on the latter.

The responses of the ruled, as presented in this novel range from total
surrender to an armed struggle. They can be grouped into two broad
categories, namely, those of non-resistance and resistance. The path of
surrender falls in the first category and that of struggle of any kind active or
passive, physical or intellectual, literary or non-literary can be included in the
second category. The path of the common people other than the boatmen
choose to adopt is that of non-resistance as they do not know what the
announcement by the Astrologer implies as pleased, because they liked big
words, but confuse:
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. There were exceptions to this, no doubt, the Head Boatman being one of them. Not only did she believe that the speech had been made, she felt it had a meaning, which was not apparent on the surface. (18)

The narrator’s observation that “they did not understand” signifies that in his view those who do not understand the political implications of political steps can do nothing but surrender. Even the boatmen once resolve the surrender and the narrator reports:

When the marigolds pierced the top of the mango grove the boatmen decided to capitulate and take the Astrologer’s oath and put their thumb impressions on affidavits of the same. (144)

Since this resolution is not transformed into action, it is surrender in resolution and so a temporary adoption of the path of non-resistance. The path that Bhumiputra, the Grand-father, the Professor, Shani, and Shailja's brother adopt is one of resistance and all of them in one way or the other resist the Grand Master is taking in order to gain more power.

The resistance of the victims presented in the novel is broadly of two kinds: passive and active. Those who do nothing to counter the measures of the Grand Master but at the same time refuse to surrender can be called passive resisters and those measures can be called active resisters. The Grand-father’s resistance is an illustration of the passive resistance as he
does nothing to counter the moves of those wielding power but only keeps Bhumiputra at his rose-farm and puts a few obstructions in the way of the Police Commissioner and his son when they come to arrest Bhumiputra as a result of which he gets his house destroyed and loses his life along with Bhumiptura.

The active resistance presented in the novel is again of two kinds: physical and intellectual. The resistance of those who take up arms against the oppressor is physical active resistance while the resistance of those who simply educate people and explain to them what is wrong with the Grand Master’s policies is intellectual active resistance. For instance, the resistance of the boatmen who take up arms to fight oppression and defend their way of living is physical active resistance. So Shani as he too takes up arms against the forces of the Grand Master. But the resistance of Bhumiputra, who tells people the symbolic story of the naked king, is intellectual active resistance. Even when Bhumiputra drafts a petition and sends the Grand Master a charter of four demands, namely:

One, immediate withdrawal of the astrologer’s oath. Two, return of all the vanished ones. Three, a public trial of all those responsible for the professor’s death and the headman’s blinding. Four, the legalizing of the illegal children as well as the restoration of future children. (187)
So is the Headman’s resistance when she is trying to persuade the Astrologer, are children of the great river, and only of the great river.

The Boatman, Astrologer, is children of the great river, and only of he Great River. You must have known this when you made that speech. How can we become children of the Grand Master or of anyone else? Your speech upset the boatmen. We do not know why you made it (19)

The intellectual active resistance presented in the novel is again of the kinds: non-literary and literary. The intellectual active resistance in which the speaker puts his arguments in a straightforward manner is non-literary but the one in which the speaker puts his arguments through their objective correlative or in an aesthetically appealing manner, is literary. For instance, the resistance of the Professor when he sets up a lottery stall and starts speaking to the crowds through a story that Bhoma is innocent” (122) is non-literary, while the resistance of Shailja’s brother who tries to communicate to the crowds through a story. Of these two, the novelist seems to favor the second one as he shows that the Professor’s speeches fail to create the desired effect on the audience while he lauds the way of Shailja’s brother when he says:

With practice the Professor noted, Shailja’s brother’s style or narration had undergone a change. He recited the story of the naked king, as through it were a ballad out of the city’s hoary past and he an ancient bard who had emerged from out of the depths
of the Great River to remind the city of a long forgotten truth. By the end of the second day, he had begun to sound like the Astrologer when he recited verses in the ancient tongue that no one understood. But everyone understood the young man and listened to him in silence. (129)

Since this form of resistance is the most effective one, it can be safely concluded that the novelist stands for it more than for any other form. This novel embodies the view that one who misuses political power cannot escape undergoing punishment for it even if he succeeds in eliminating all his opponents. In the novel, punishment comes to the offender from nature. Even though none of the men rising against the Grand Master succeeds in removing him as the Headman is blinded and later, deserted by her own followers, Bhoma's telling people that the king is naked comes to a stop when he comes to stay with the Grand-father and, later on, dies when the Son demolishes the Grand-father's house in an attempt to arrest him, the Professor dies as a result of his fast unto death in prison, and Shailja's brother immolates himself, there comes the river a flood in the face of which the king finds himself helpless:

The waters not 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 water because all of a sudden the river was not a river any more. Under the all-
The pervasive glow of searchlights in turned into an ancient city, 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. The inmates of the palace shuddered in horror as the new Grand Master's building broke in the middle and floor by floor, frame by frame, fell into the sea. One last wave uprooted the foundations and sent them flying into the sky. The waters swept over the top of the hill and cascaded on the other side in a loud waterfall. (157-58)

One feels that when human beings have failed, Nature used water, one of the elements, to punish the guilty. The fact signifies that the novelist posits his faith in, what has come to be known as, the Divine Justice. Now the question comes whether the novel provides a solution to the problem as to what kind of political system is safe for the people. Since the novelist is exposing how a democratic established can be misused and replaced by dictatorship, it is evident that he stands for neither dictatorship nor democracy. The courses of incidents included in the novel signifies that the novelist likes to have a political system in which the ruler does not oppress people, as when the Professor is lying on his death bed he has hope: “There will be no Grand Masters. There will be a new world; a new race of men will be born.” (167) Besides call as to what kind of political system is better than a democratic system. It signifies that the novelist does not suggest any alternative political
system but wishes to have one in which there is no oppression. This novel has few weaknesses. One of them is the prophecy in accordance with which incidents occurs. The prophecy in question reads as follows:

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. (216)

This prophecy is an embodiment of the view that the incidents, which are occurring in the novel because they are destined to occur. But if the incidents are destined to occur the persons who appear to be making them, occur cannot be held responsible for them and so deserve neither rewards nor punishments for them.

For example, the Grand Master could have been charged with having declared himself king and, thus, having realized his ambition at the cost of people's civil liberties, cannot be charged with that in the light of the prophecy as the prophet has already written “A king I see upon a throne” and that signifies that the Grand Master a simple instrument in the hands of destiny
and frees him from the blame of any kind. When one has read, finally the Astrologer said, “Grand Master, the time has come to let you know that speaks of the coming of a king. Your dream is the herald that we have been waiting for.” One begins to feel that the Grand Master is helpless tool in the hands of fate and has been chosen by Fate to declare himself king and so when one comes to the Minister's distorting facts and misguiding his listeners to agree to have a king in the land in the following words:

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 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 citizen's material and spiritual needs. In short, gentlemen, what this city needs above all are a monarch, a king. And unless we first provide it with one the disturbances will continue Army or no Army. (211)

The whole force of satire behind the speech is lost. It the city is destined to have a king, neither the Grand Master nor the Minister is to blame for his coming into existence and if it is so, there is no point in punishing him for what he has done. Since it is a part of the prophecy that “A thing of darkness growing dark on city walls the shadow's mark,” (216) it is evident that the king is destined to become more and more tyrannical and when one comes to the description,
While the brigadier was soothing his old friends, taking advantage of his absence the ‘police bastard’ had ordered a commando to let Bhoma have a taste of his rifle butt. 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. (245)

One cannot lie at the door of the authorities as one knows that they are destined to grow dark and the “shadow's mark” is destined to reach the walls of the city. Likewise, since the prophecy includes the prediction. “The hermit, the parrot, the teacher die,” (216) the sacrificial sufferings of the persons opposing the king’s ways fail to become pathetic because one knows that they are instruments in the hands of fate and are destined to die.

One deserves punishment for a misdeed only if one has chosen to do it of one’s absolutely free will. If an incident has already been prophesied, it is evident that one is doing a deed as an instrument rather than of one’s own free will with the result that none of the characters deserves either any praise. Another weakness of the novel is the novelist’s showing what the Grand Master is not peculiar to him alone but is a phenomenon that occurs again and again when the Great Yogeshwara tells his disciple.

There is also another Council and another set of Councilors. The men have other names but the forces they embody remain
unchanged. 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 humor. (262)

One gets the impression that the fault lies not with a person but with the chair because if the fault had been with a particular person, there would have been no repetition. In other words, this reminds one of the popular saying that power corrupts everybody. And if everybody occupying the position of the Grand Master and behaves like this Grand Master, who makes himself king in the novel, cannot be regarded as guilty. And if he is not guilty at all that he has to occur whoever comes to the chair of the Grand Master, there is no point in blaming him for it. A hero or a protagonist has to have free will and is to be presented as facing misfortunes on account of having chosen a wrong path rather than the right one. Unless this is done the hero cannot be charged with having done any wrong.

One may say that the Great Yogeshwara’s words signify that the novelist does not regard it as inevitable for one to behave like the Grand Master of the novel. However, this single line is not in concord with the rest of the passage quoted above, as in every other sentence of the passage he stresses the fact of repetition. Even the following remark of the Great Yogeshwara to the Nameless-One, “The main thing is to prevent this endless repetition, this periodic disintegration. But to achieve that we need purity,”
(262) implies that but for the cases of purity, the repetition is inevitable and this implication too implies that most Grand Masters are likely to behave like this Grand Master. One naturally comes to the conclusion that the fault lies with the post rather than the person holding it. However, the strength of the novel lies in passages such as this:

And I learnt that fears was the greatest ally of the kings and grand masters of the world, for without fear to freeze the hearts and the limbs of their subjects many a throne would have been toppled and many a crown blown off with the breath from the oppressed. And I saw that where man had thrown off his blanket of fear there alone truth had triumphed and great civilization flourished and man had taken another step towards God...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; and what you might have seen through the professor’s telescopes... There is the upward path that leads to freedom and there is the downward path that, for the moment at least, must lead to perdition. The city is free to choose either. (155-56)

Such utterances as this bring order where disorder has been prevailing. Another such passage is the following one: “So let not fear show confusion in your heart. Whatever happens the Lord will not forsake you, nor will work be fruitless. Of this you can be certain.” (157) Such utterances as those give
people hope and enlightenment and the readers of English literature are not likely to let them die.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Even the Grand Master’s dream in which a vast host of naked men’ form a circle like a noose around the Grand Master and the circle tightens ‘until he could feel their breath of a volcano from out of the depths of the surrounding sea’ and he shouts at them “This hill is mine,” (14-15) signifies that the conflict between him and the boatmen is destined to be there, irrespective of what he does.