The Existential Predicament

A Study of The City and the River
Arun Joshi’s the fifth and the final novel, *The City and the River* was published in 1990 after a gap of nine years. The novel is, “a continuation of and an improvement upon Joshi’s major thematic concerns.” It aims at discovering solutions to the recurring problems of man’s birth and death. The novel runs simultaneously on two levels, physical and metaphysical. There is a deep inner meaning and specific purpose behind the creation of some of the eccentric characters. Joshi while dealing with the complexities of the modern society makes an attempt to expose the plots of the modern day politicians. He probes deep into the psyche of the common man to confirm his age old attachments with nature that makes him refuse to acknowledge the supremacy of the so called, self-appointed, Grand Masters of the society. It is about the poor man’s assertion in rejecting the rule of the usurpers. It is about equal rights and equal distribution of wealth. In O.P.Mathur’s view:

The theme of the novel is multilateral, spanning its political, sociological and mythical dimensions in a world which transcends its contemporaneity and contains characters who are archetypes rather than recognizable human beings with individual characteristics.

*The City and the River* is the result of an attempt by the writer to come to grips with himself and with the society. It holds a mirror to the common man’s sentiments and aspirations. It can also be considered as a political novel. As George A Panichas rightly observes,
It is certain that creative artists in the modern age are increasingly preoccupied with social problems as a whole and with political problems in particular. For the modern writer politics in all its forms, as theory, as commitment, as action, has become a matter of consciousness, and of conscience. Aesthetic considerations are invariably coloured by social-political demands. In effect, the writer as seen in his art and in his actions.... Fearlessly and confidently-ventured into the public realm.123

In ancient India it was a common practice among Kings and Emperors to send their sons to ashrams, small hamlets, in the deep forests run by austere saints and sages who were well-versed in all branches of knowledge. The prologue of The City and the River introduces a Guru and a Shishya- a master and a disciple, located somewhere near the Himalayas.

The teacher is the tall, well-built, long, grey haired and bearded, the Great Yogeshwara, and the taught is the Nameless-One. He was taught, both invaluable and of little value, ideas of the ancestors in an ancient language which no one understood. He is advised to keep the ideas separate, like grain and chaff, to avoid harm. In Anup Beniwal’s view this:

Tale is imbued with universal and eternal significance.

The whole actions which unfolds itself in a 'Nowhere and
hence Everywhere City’ is narrated through the Great Ageless Yogeshwara to the Nameless—One—the two symbolic figures—as a recurring myth of regeneration and decay, while initiating him into his life-mission.\textsuperscript{124}

The only thing he hadn’t been taught in thirty years was his identity. The Guru, to celebrate his disciple’s thirtieth birthday, gives him an elixir to drink which makes the Nameless—One feel as vast as the sky and as tall as the mountain, with the music of one-string and the sound of the dancing feet of God in his ears, and the Great Yogeshwara begins the sorry tale.

The city, in its order of hierarchy, accommodates its middle and lower class citizens, mud-people, also called the Nameless-Ones, in the narrow, brown mud huts. Next are, on a higher platform, rosy pink brick buildings for the upper middle, affluent sections of the society, with their special schools, clubs and shopping malls. Next in the order are the Seven Hills, from where the Grand Master, who resides in the place on the tallest hill, rules the city with his Council of Ministers whose offices are tall immaculate structures of steel and glass, located on the other hills. The Grand Master has set up an advisory council which consists of the Astrologer, the Ministers for Trade, the Education Advisor, the Police Commissioner and the Master of Rallies.
The Grand Master, a hereditary ruler, believes he loves the city. But of late he has a nagging feeling that people, especially boatmen are not only losing faith in him but also are becoming unruly and even mutinous. In Subhash Chandra’s view,

The political vision incorporates the message that once the rulers resort to tyranny for their own ends, suspicion and distrust mark the relations amongst themselves and each plots to destroy the other in order to go up the ladder of power.125

The Grand Master, like a modern day politician who buys votes and voters, was planning to set a price even for the boatmen. But, his father had warned him that the boatmen could never be bought because they are the children of the river and their allegiance is only to the river, for which they are even prepared to die.

One day the Grand Master becomes a King in his dream, where he sees himself sitting on a throne at the top of the hill surrounded by river water from which the naked boatmen arise to dethrone him. The Astrologer heralds the dream as the herald of a prophecy. But before the Kingship is realized, the hurdle to be cleared is to bring the boatmen on to their knees. The would be king not able to digest their insolence bursts out:

At the slightest excuse they raise their rebellious standards and not a day passes when the streets are not
filled with their vulgar din. Their ugliness fills me with
disgust. The city poor, but even in poverty there can be
dignity. Must they live in such appalling conditions, go
about half-naked? When I look at them I am filled with
shame. They are a disgrace.126

The city is poor, the boatmen are poor but the Grand Master’s
palace, with its dome, is a marvel of modern architecture. The
Ministers live in sprawling bungalows. The rulers want to freeze the
strength of the boatmen as there is a threat of revolt both to the city
and to the palace. Usha Bande is of the opinion that the Grand
Master:

is trying to assume unlimited powers as a King. The
Astrologer, one of the sycophants of the Grand Master,
boosts his ego by prophesying that nothing can hinder his
coronation. The Grand Master, in his blindness, lets his
coteries adopt ruthless measures to crush the masses,
stifle the opponents and perpetuate the reign of terror. All
ethical norms are compromised. The corrupt regime is
ruled over by sycophancy, selfishness, nepotism and
inefficiency. The ultimate victims are the masses.127

The Astrologer announces the Triple Way or the Way of the
Three Beatitudes. The first one insists on their allegiance to the Grand
Master, the second is one child to a mother and the third one is a
warning that those who defy the first two will be punished under a new law of Compassionate Righteousness. Except for the Head Boatman, surprisingly a woman, no one could read between the lines. There is an argument between the Head Boatman and the Astrologer in which the leader defends her people that, though their number is large, there is enough of crop but the grace of the river and the city’s granaries are full. But the only drawback is the boatmen do not have enough money to buy. The Head Boatman believes in equal rights:

You said the wealth of the city belongs to the people. Let the Grand Master ask the brick people to give up their wealth, restore it to Him from whom all the wealth flows. Let the city’s wealth be put to use for the benefit of all. Let the boatmen’s children have an equal chance with the children of the brick-people, to grow and flourish as it must surely have been intended for them to grow and flourish. Then we shall see. If the city still remains poor we shall gladly give up our children but not before that.

(TCTR 20)

On the failure of the Triple Way, the rulers come out with a new decree called The Era of Ultimate Greatness to order the people to beware of the enemy within and the enemy without. The rulers forget the fact that it was the blood of the boatmen that had saved the city from enemy without over the ages.
Critics like O.P. Mathur see some similarities between the Grand Master's rule and the Emergency period (1974-75) in India. He says:

The Era of ultimate Greatness is not only a satire on the Emergency but is also a parable of evil drunk with power attempting to encroach upon the traditional primitive culture of the Boatmen.\textsuperscript{128}

Dharma Vira is a police officer who lives in a brick house along with his mother and father. His father is an official, whose brother is a reputed astronomer, also known as Professor. Dharma is young, innocent and obedient, which reminds one, the young Ratan Rathore of ‘The Apprentice’. Dharma is entrusted by the commissioner to arrest Bhumiputra, also known as Master Bhma a resident of mud huts, teaching Mathematics. Bhumiputras charged with propaganda against the king. Though Bhma escape from the arrest, on his own, there spreads a rumor that he was helped by the armed men of the Education Advisor.

The Astrologer is instructed to reveal to the people, on the day of the festival of the River, Master Bhma’s alleged conspiracy to kill the Grand Master. But the Education Advisor conspires with his son to turn Master Bhma’s conspiracy to his own advantage. Meanwhile the Minister for Trade, who is a cousin of the Grand Master, gets busy making money with the help of his right-hand man Mr. Pinstripes, who is an expert in black marketing technique.
The Hermit and the Astrologer had studied under the same great Yogeshwara. Both had a copy of the prophecy. The Astrologer, who wears a sacred thread, reaches the place. The poor Hermit, with no sacred thread is put up in a mud hut near the river. The Minister for Trade, who visits him often, asks him about the rumor of the coming King. The Hermit not only confirms, but also says that the people of the city have a choice either to stop or to choose a right King.

The rules are not only class conscious but also caste conscious. The commissioner is the worst sufferer of high caste-low caste discrimination. He gets insulted openly by the Education Advisor. The Grand Master likes the low caste Commissioner, for whom he is faithful like a dog. But the shocking thing is that the Commissioner himself looks down upon thousands of other low caste people. There are hundreds of others with whom he refuses to eat or drink. Probably this is the reason for the disintegration of Dalith unity in this country which is leading to several inequalities within the community.

Bhumiputra is a scrawny bearded son of the river, who wears a lion cloth. Bhoma hails from a family of weavers of fine silk. His parents die in an epidemic caused by adulterated ‘boatmen grade’ edible oil. After high school he joins as a cleaner of telescopes in the Professor’s lab, where the Professor teaches him Mathematics for six years. In the University Bhoma was asked his opinion on the Astrologer’s three truths. Bhoma, to his own surprise, like in a dream,
starts relating the King’s clothes parable to the teachers and students of all classes.

The New Era begins with the arrest of an old boatman and a clown. The old boatman was arrested because his wife had an illegal child and the clown, for laughing while boatman was being arrested. The clown had laughed because he had seen the boatman moved to tears at the Astrologer’s speech.

When Dharma does not find Bhumiputra, he arrests his neighbour, as per the rule, Patanjali a ninety year old, skinny, toothless man, like the rest of the boatmen had absolutely no personal belongings and his thin wrists were even smaller than the handcuffs. The boatmen live a simple life. They are happy with two meals a day. They are quite independent and do not work under others. Half the time they are found talking and playing on the one string. Unlike the rich, they are against personal possessions.

Bhoma’s sister requests the star tracking Professor to locate her brother. Bhoma was the best student of the Professor. The Professor goes to the staff secretary of the Education Advisor on the advice of his personified Little Star, a small brown boy, with a shaven head, in a lion cloth. The staff secretary, a lady, warns him not to look for his missing student. The Education Advisor himself is an unemployed youth-turned power monger. He is the commander-in-chief of a Shock Brigade of students and teachers whose constituencies unitedly he
represents. His son is a merciless killer who behaves rudely with the Professor by blowing cigarette smoke into his face. The Professor’s innocence makes one laugh when he says, “I must say you are an uncommonly silly young man. If I had you in my class I would make you stand on the bench.” (TCTR 85)

The Professor is surprised to see a straight road from Seven Hills to the river. It is the straightest, the widest and the cleanest of all the roads. In fact, the Rallies Master and the town planner, to fulfill Grand Master’s wife’s wish, had bulldozed overnight boatmen’s hearths and huts on both sides of the ancient avenue Great River. They had straightened it and renamed it Boulevard Seven Hills. Though some of the, displaced, complainers disappeared mysteriously, the complaints didn’t stop. Finally on the orders issued by the Astrologer people started carrying on their daily chores as though they have a roof over their heads. Vase, the big hulky journalist, dubbed it ‘Avenue Asthough’ in his underground paper ‘The Rumblings’

The Grand Master’s intolerance grows against the boatmen’s dissent when they protest with raised torches in a ‘display of soul’. His nightly watch helicopter lands in the rose farm belonging to Dharma’s grandfather and he exclaims at the beauty and variety of roses because even after the best efforts of the horticulturist there was nothing green on the hills. Nature, as if to expose the guilt and the crime of the Seven Hills never allows either grass or flowers to grow...
anywhere on those Hills. T.K.Ghosh probes into the reasons for no vegetation on the hills, that,

The absence of flowers in the Seven Hills suggests their detachment from the nature symbolized by the great and bounteous river. It is this separation that breeds corruption in the rulers and leads to their ruin.\footnote{129}

When Dharma, his fiancée Shailaja, daughter of the owner of the ‘Great River Boats’ and editor Vasu are listening to Shailaja’s brother, who is a member of the secret society of mediators, Vasu gesticulates his fists at the helicopters, which results in the Captain’s snatching away of Vasu. But he is dropped on the ground when he shows an invitation, to have drinks, with the Master of Rallies. Being a child of boatmen, the Rallies Master had to struggle a lot to complete his education. Later with great difficulty he finds a job at the ‘Great River Boats’. Very soon he becomes a worker’s leader of all the workers because of knowing the pulse of the poor, but unfortunately he becomes a pawn in the hands of the ruling classes. Though a sympathizer of the boatmen, all his actions are directed at pleasing the Grand Master. He thinks his behavior is worse than even an animal. He reveals his inner feelings to Vasu and speaks about his conscientious cowardice:

But I cannot understand why I am afraid. What is it that fills me with dread every time I come into the Grand
Master’s presence? I have no family, no wish to get rich. I do not wish to become famous I have no friends to lose. Am I afraid of going to prison? In fact I am, but why? There is no one to mourn me, nor do I have commitments that would suffer. I have none of the disabilities of the ordinary people. Why, then, am I afraid? (TCTR 75)

The fact is, like Ratan, the Rallies Master is scared of humiliation in public. He is ready to speak the truth and go to jail, if the humiliation is kept a secret.

_The City and the River_ is an allegory of the contemporary world. How the developing and the underdeveloped, third world countries spend more money on buying arms and armaments, instead of concentrating on eradicating poverty, can be easily understood from the Commissioner’s argument. Even in twenty first century, one finds many rules in different countries implementing, unnecessarily, military solutions for common civilian problems. Probably it is easy for them to annihilate the poor instead of poverty. This can be better understood from the logic of the Commissioner. Because the whole city is poor, it seems they “need more guns. This might sound absurd but the fact is that the poorer a city is the more guns its government needs.” (TCTR 82) The Commissioner clarifies the Professor that, the laws of the city do not permit him to consider the citizens’ freedom or their human rights. The Professor plays the role of a spokesman for the common man. The Grand Trader, like Mr. Khemka in _The
*Foreigner*, is a man of the world. Dharma comes to arrest him for hoarding the entire stock of cooking oil. The Grand Trader asks Dharma to take action against Mr. Pinstripe for encouraging him to break the laws. Mr. Pinstripe is a representative of the bureaucracy. Though he is well-mannered, and always seen in suits, he works as an agent between the Trader and the Minister for Trade and takes a lion’s share. Hence he is referred as Lion by some people. In Grand Traders’ view to Mr. Pinstripe:

> Arrests, jails, New Era’s were all children’s make-believe. The only reality in the world, he knew, was the reality of money..... He firmly believed that he was a link in that unbreakable chain that connected the producers of goods with their consumers. .... For more than sixty years he had seen over and over that in spite of admonitions, books, declaration of the respective Grand Masters, the laws of supply and demand had never ceased to function.  
> (TCTR 90-91)

In any society traders play a key role in breaking the rules and making the officers corrupt. They make their own margins between the manufacturer and the customer like a *pujari* between the God and a devotee. The two local newspapers, owned and controlled, directly or indirectly, by the Grand Master, carry the picture of Master Bhoma with incredible, captions like, ‘The case of the Mysterious Master’, ‘Teacher Turns Traitor’ followed by outrageous lies under those
headings. On the occasion of the Festival of the River the boatmen get a picture of Master Bhoma pasted on their boats.

At the festival of the River, the Grand Master, sitting on a Golden throne, participates in the *yagna* conducted by the Astrologer. The Hermit objects to the Astrologer’s praise of the Grand Master, in the celebrations of immortal Time, and then quietly disappears. The Astrologer, in an act of showing loyalty to the King, announces the coronation of The Grand Master’s son, though public are reluctant to applaud his crowning.

Dharma, the Professor and the hundreds of boatmen are arrested soon after the festival. The Commissioner gives Dharma one more chance. The Professor is set free on the interference of the Minister for Trade through the Grand Master. But the boatmen are packed to the Gold Mines, a place of punishment, which in due course makes the prisoners forget who they are. The same evening Dharma’s father-in-law throws a banquet dinner where Dharma is surprised to see the Grand Trader whom he had arrested twenty four hours ago. This shows the influence of the business class in any society. Traders always think of ways and means of making more money. They proclaim:

> We only want to know where a commodity is available and, if available whether it will create a shortage if bought in large quantities, thus raising the price above the level
at which it was bought. That is all that we want to know. Of course, we also have to know where warehouses are available, who is to be bribed to prevent raids on these warehouses and so on. And now, sir, I must give you a final word of advice and then I shall be off. My advice is this: You must take bribes. A police officer who does not take bribes comes under suspicion. (TCTR 106)

The Minister for Trade thinks that Bhoma is planning to kill him. He suspects the Grand Master's hand in Bhoma's conspiracy. Master of Rallies gets severely rebuked by the Astrologer for the power shut down at the time of the Son's crowing. They could not show the live telecast of the video. The Master of Rallies, being sensitive, commits suicide to avoid jail. The Son fills his place in the Advisory Council. The Hermit advises the Minister for Trade to expose the nakedness to the throne. Dharma is ordered to arrest the fifty boatmen who participated in the boat race. With the headman's warning of a strike Dharma leaves only with the photographs. The newspapers not only print the photographs but praise the Astrologer for his intelligence and the Commissioner for this vigilance.

As the Professor cannot make use of the media, he puts up a free lottery stall to speak about Bhoma's innocence. The winners are offered choicest roses from the Grandfather's farm. Shailaja's brother, who was a student of Bhoma, attracts large crowds to the lottery stall with (Bhma's) king's new clothes story. He addresses seventy people
in each session, seven times a day for seven days. Finally the stall is crushed and the Flying Patrol. The next day the Head Boatman and his lieutenants are arrested on the specific instructions of the Astrologer. The Grandfather is proud of his son, who stands up for his ideas. As the king’s story spreads to a large number of people, the Advisory Council decides unanimously to implement the laws of the ‘dragnet’. Dharma’s list of night arrests increase. The boatmen tell him that: “Men of his station and authority so totally forgot their Dharma instead of protecting the helpless; they chose only to crush them further under their heels.” (TCTR 139)

Shailaja is also of the same opinion. The boatmen become orphans with the arrest of the Headman. As the missing cases increase they even decide to take the Astrologer’s oath and put their thumb impressions on the affidavits. The Hermit, sensing the trap, asks Bhumiputra to help them lest they should destroy themselves. Night after night, drifting in an oar less boat, Bhoma tries to educate the illiterate boatmen. Vasu sends under the pretext of meeting the (already arrested) Professor, to the Grandfather, who readily welcomes him.

Shani, Grandfather’s great grandson, a boy in lion cloth, who is the caretaker of the farm, happily offers his hut to Bhoma. Shani who moves closely with the boatmen is an expert musician on the one-string. Master Bhoma agrees to stay with the grandfather till the return of the Professor. The Hermit encourages Bhoma to get rid of
fear because he had, “learnt that nothing enfeebled man more than fear that nothing but fear stood between him and his liberation. .... Fear was the greatest ally of the kings and grandmasters 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 breath of the oppressed.” (TCTR 155-56)

Only in such places where people were fearless, truth had triumphed and great civilization had flourished. The Hermit hopes that the truth of Bhoma’s parable might, “though the Grand Master sees himself with the eye of the citizen, a new light will dawn upon him and a change will come over him and that the change will mean a new life for this dying city.” (TCTR 157)

Bhoma, in the Grandfather’s farm, overcome by grief, wants to surrender himself to the Commissioner in exchange for Professor’s release. But Grandfather dissuades him from taking such an extreme step. The plight of the prisoners, in the Gold Mines, makes one believe that hell would be a better place. In the dungeons of the eternal darkness the Headman’s eyes were pierced with needles and acid was poured into the perforations. Her screams of anger shake the Gold mines. Usha Bande opines that, “Here, people are interned and destroyed. It is almost Dante’s Inferno, which is symbolic of the hell man creates on the earth to torture others.”130
The Professor, who demands the release of the prisoners and insists on a trail for the Grand Master and Astrologer, goes on hunger strike. Just before the Professor’s death he wishes for a new beginning where, “there will be no Grand Masters. There will be a new world; a new race of men will be born.” (TCTR 167) The Grand Master even orders the Astrologer to issue a not to be implemented decree, which, in B.D. Sharma’s analysis is:

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.131

The boatmen, with whose swear and blood the city’s wealth is produced, as a last resort, take a, “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 us heed.” (TCTR 178) The government, instead of holding talks with the striking boatmen, considers it as an ill-advised work of traitors. The rulers, after twenty four hours’ notice, want to cancel their licenses and hand over the river transport to the Navy.

In a secret meeting the Minister for Trade assures protection to Education Advisor and his Shock Brigades. After prolonged negotiation they sign a deed of national partnership, which guarantees a five percent share of the city’s cash flow to the Education Advisor for ninety nine years. He can have the unchallenged proprietorship of the
students and the teachers. All this he can enjoy only when he supports the minister's claim to the Grand Mastership. Their treachery does not end there. They sign a separate agreement of joint ownership on Master Bhoma, as and when he is caught.

Unfortunately the boatmen, against Bhumiputra's advice, accept the help of the Shock Brigades which turns into an uprising that leads to systematic burning down of shops, schools, buses, telephone exchanges and railway stations. They even break into the Gold mines and get the Headmen and Shailaja's brother out. In the company of Dharma's father-in-law, the 'Great River Boats', also the workers start a sit-in-strike to get their union leader released. Under the in-charge ship of the Captain of the Flying Patrol all the two hundred unarmed workers are, in a Jallianwala Bagh type of massacre, mowed down with machine guns, where Dharma as captain's assistant stands like a, useless and helpless, mute spectator. Dharma is ordered to dump the four truckloads of dead bodies into the river. Dharma goes into a shock after reading a truly false report in the newspaper that all the two hundred striking workers were sent home peacefully. After the Headman's counseling, Dharma stays in bed in the Grandfather's rose farm, seven days with eyes open and another seven days with eyes shut. When Dharma starts dressing up like Master Bhoma, in a lion cloth, there is an uncanny resemblance between the two.
The boatmen intensify their strike by raising barricades on all possible ways. They submit a petition with four demands to withdraw oath, return the vanished ones, punish the ruling guilty, and legalize the illegal children. The petition, which contains seven boatmen’s thumb impressions, gives them seven days’ time. The Grand Master, in a cold act, sets the document on fire. Such is the callousness of the heads of state. Vasu’s effort, to get the document printed in the local newspapers, proves futile.

The Minister for Trade, through Pinstripe, negotiates with the Chief-of-Army General Starch to seek his support for his candidature to the Grand Mastership. He gets a share in the loot (of the public). The General, who is mourning the disappearance of his hundred year old prophetic parrot, readily agrees to the proposal. A second Deed of National Partnership is signed in which the Army is offered ten percent of cash flow for ninety years. But the most shocking part of the agreement is the promise of a war every five years, which shows the extent to which ministers can debase themselves.

When the Grand Master himself, flying the helicopter by himself, comes for the search of the parrot, the generous General assures him that, despite Army’s support, the Grand Master is free to remove the would be Grand Master as and when he finds him unsatisfactory.
The Grand Master, dissolving the Advisory Council, constitutes a Supreme Council by adding Search and his deputy, who is a son-in-law of the Grand Trader, and dropping the low-caste Commissioner. The seven members of the Supreme Council, in an underground chamber, in the dead of the night, as a climax to their clandestine operations, elect the Grand Master the King of the city. All the members, apart from supporting the hereditary rule, shamelessly, decide – to prevent the low-caste people – that only a high-caste person should be made king. They argue that a race horse can never be born of a mule. But what they refuse to accept, in their visible blindness, is the fact, that a strong and healthy mule is hundred times better than a cunning, demented, old and whimpering race-horse. One is reminded of G.K. Chesterton’s poem The Donkey in which the hard working animal receives rich accolades for patience. The King had to set aside his son to make his cousin, the Minister for Trade, the New Grand Master. Finally all the conspiring members come to a unanimous conclusion to crush all the alleged conspiracies of Bhoma and the boatmen in order to maintain, “A balance of power among the four elites of this city, namely, the great families represented by His Majesty himself, the armed forces, youth power... and the business classes.” (TCTR 214)

Since this balance of power is threatened by an ordinary Mathematics teacher, all the elite groups, suddenly realize the importance of coming together lest they should perish in the hands of
the overwhelming number of the masses. They give an ultimatum, surprisingly not to Bhoma but, to the Commissioner to produce Bhoma dead or alive within seventy two hours. As soldier is not supposed to shoot at unarmed civilians it is suggested that the soldiers should attack in plain clothes.

The Hermit, having understood the gravity of the situation re-read the parallelogram that is part of the city’s prophecy. Both the Astrologer and the Hermit had discussed and differed endlessly on one particular line, “The River, I see, from a teacher rise.” (TCTR 216) The Hermit had stuck to the literal meaning, whereas the Astrologer had maintained that it was, “A teacher, I see, from the river rise.” (TCTR 217) The Hermit is worried about the future of the city. So he sends a request note, along with the parallelogram, to the Astrologer to consider the meaning of the line once again and to take both the interpretations to the notice of the king, so that he can choose the right one. The Astrologer, after reading the note, is afraid of the king’s safety. But the king, in his arrogance does not heed to the Astrologer’s suggestion that he should leave the city for a few days. The king asks him not to be afraid either of boatmen or of the God, whom he does not care at all.

The demoted Commissioner visits the Grandfather’s farm to arrest Bhumiputra. The skinny teacher does not look like an assassin. The Grandfather for the first time learns about his son’s death in the Gold Mines. The news leaves all the inmates of the farm in tears. The
Commissioner also is about to cry and postpones the arrest for two days. The Captain of the Flying Patrol pollutes the new Grand Master’s mind by telling him that the Commissioner had kept quite all these days despite knowing the whereabouts of Bhoma. The Captain who is eagerly waiting to become the next Commissioner finds great pleasure in serving the dismissal and arrest orders to the ‘low-caste-good-for-nothing swine’ of a Commissioner.

As an outcome of the Supreme Council’s decision, Shock Brigades withdraw their support to the boatmen and quietly disappear with their arms and ammunition. Shailaja’s brother takes the responsibility for the betrayal and offers his head to the Headman. The soldiers are in grey green tanks burn down both the barricades and boatmen with their silent lasers. The charred bodies are pushed into the river. No amount of Hermit’s persuasion could stop Shailaja’s brother from the act of immolation.

The Grandfather does not want to handover innocent Bhoma without any resistance. It is not expected of a host to send his guest to jail. Innocent though it may seem, the Grandfather, after his accidental meeting with the Hermit, wants to give the king another chance by submitting a ten page petition. The King as usual, without showing any concern, directs the Grandfather, Vasu and Dharma to General Starch who in turn asks the new Commissioner (the old Captain) to read it. The petitioners are dismissed with a warning to surrender Bhoma with the fictions details of, number of conspirators,
armaments, fortifications and communication systems. The new Commissioner who believes all this to be true thinks that only an army Brigade can counter such a big threat. The Son who is under military training with a rank of Honorary Colonel goes a step further and declares that all the three armed forces should be deployed in a combined attack. He wants to personally co-ordinate the attack, which consists of an Admiral of the Navy to command the gun-boat, a Brigadier of the Air Force to Para-drop one hundred commandos from the latest helicopters and fifty army commandos with cannon under the in-charge of the Commissioner. The whole plan looks silly and stupid to a common man. But they seem to be really serious about carrying it out even to the minutest detail.

There is a heavy downpour. Bhoma wants to leave, not to save himself but, to save the Grandfather, Shani, Dharma and Vasu. But the Grandfather is bent upon protecting Bhoma. Shailaja and the mother arrive. The police take away the Father for deliberately drafting the New Decree in such a way as to result in the jamming of jails. Before he left he had given a medal to Shailaja, which was awarded to him in honor of most selfless dedication to public duty. She was to give it to his future grandchildren.

Shailaja emerges as the most unfortunate character in the whole novel. Though Joshi does not give her much scope either to grow independently or to express herself freely like June in *The Foreigner* or Anuradha of *The Last Labyrinth*, the reader sympathizes
with her, for almost all the people she loves or respects become one way or other, victims of the Seven Hills. Her worry begins with Bhumiputra. Next comes to the massacre at the boat works owned by
her father. She leaves her father’s house. Then comes Dharma’s breakdown. Dharma’a father also suffers from surrealist, mental and physical disorders. She had to look after both Dharma at the farm and
his parents in the house. Her brother is involved in the boatmen’s strike. She, unaware of his immolation, keeps looking for him. It seems there is no end to her woes. The poor lady probably does not
know that the worse is yet to come.

In the evening when Shailaja and Shani are watching the river, as expected, the three armed forces encircle the Grandfather’s farm house. The Commissioner and the Brigadier were Dharma’s classmates. The Brigadier had loved Shailaja deeply. Bhoma can’t be arrested separately as his left hand is chained to the Grandfather’s right hand. Bhoma loses half a dozen teeth when a commando hits him on the face with the butt of his rifle. With the second blow blood starts gushing out of his ear and nose. Though the Grandfather is equally wounded he is more worried about Bhoma who is fast losing consciousness. When Dharma runs for the first aid box in Shani’s hut, the Commissioner mistaking him for Bhoma shoots him dead. When the angry Brigadier is trying to shoot at the Commissioner, Shani takes a shot at the center of the Commissioner’s forehead, killing him instantly.
The Son gets very angry at the inefficiency of the Brigadier and orders the Colonel to arrest him and bombard the place with cannon. Within seconds, with four cannon shells, the Grandfather’s farm is reduced to dust along with its occupants. General Starch’s parrot comes to remind the Hermit that it is time to move. The Hermit, with the parrot on his left wrist, sets out to the mud hut of the boatmen, who was arrested on the first day for having an illegal child. He reaches the Professor’s ruined mangrove with the widow and the child, where Little Star is waiting. He lights a fire and performs Yagna of immortal Time to erase the blasphemy caused by the Astrologer’s Yagna on the day of the festival of the River. The Hermit instructs the crowd, sitting opposite to him, to place the child in the oar less boat that will be sent by the river in the midnight. In the Grandfather’s farm he places roses on the rubble and recites prayers to ferry their souls from this world to the next. As the river starts swelling, the Hermits puts the manuscripts, now being read by the Great Yogeshwara, in his raft and sends it to the hut of the illegal child. The river slowly engulfs both the Hermit and the parrot along with the ashes of Shailaja’s brother.

The town planner is drunk and is playing cards at the club, though he knows that mud huts are in danger of getting flooded. As he cannot reach the dead Commissioner, he rings up General Starch only to get bored with his ‘parrot’ talk. The force of the water is so much that within minutes the club, Starch’s bungalow, the mud-huts
and the brick-mansions disappear from the earth’s surface. The king is immersed; unaware that at the time is up for his real immersion, in the son’s detailed account of battle at the rose farm. The King is amused at his Son’s seriousness in the one-sided war and victory. Soon the water level increases. The Astrologer realizes the impending danger and tries to help the king and his family to escape. But the airfield is under water and the helicopter is in flames from the gun fire between the Education Advisor and the New Grand Master which had resulted in the death of both the contenders along with their supporters. The king’s last resort is a secret tunnel to pyramids. The King’s party gets stuck in the lift when the power goes off. By the time they walk to the other end, to their great shock, the river already is there, waiting for them with open hands.

If one looks back at the whole scenario through the eyes of Anup Beniwal, who feels that the conflict from its beginning to the end unravels in a

Series of symbolic and ironic incidents... incidents that are chilling, repelling, and bewildering, incredulous but always thought provoking. The whole narrative is wrapped in an ambience where sophisticated scientific gadgetry co-exists with magical feats, where fact merges with fantasy and where the time present merges with the time past to project it’s ominously into the time future. Finally the whole thing is dissolved into a mighty deluge.132
After seven days of heavy downpour there remains nothing, of
the king or any traces of his city, on the morning of the eighth day.
The Great Yogeshwara continues his story outside the cottage. They
climb down the mountain and wade through the streams and forests.
A new city had flourished on the ruins of the old city. A new Professor,
a new Bhumiputra and a new species of boatmen are waiting to fight
against a New Era of ultimate Greatness which is ready to begin. Even
a new Little Star is waiting to assist the Nameless-One, who will be
called another Hermit of the Mountain. The Great Yogeshwara’s
optimistic outlook reminds one of Sri Aurobido’s doctrines that “The
mighty perish in their might, the slain survive the slayer.”133

Even the bone of contention between the ruler and the (lowly)
ruler will be the same, allegiance to the eternal or to the mortal. The
main purpose behind the Nameless-one’s thirty years of training is “to
prevent this endless repetition, this periodic disintegration.” (TCTR
262) But first the city has to be purified of its egoism, selfishness and
stupidity. Purification demands sacrifice, which is willingly met by the
boatmen, a quality never to be found in the Grand Masters. But the
Great Yogeshwara is full of hope. This is understood in his optimistic
appraisal of the next Grand Master:

God resides as much in a Grand Master as in you and
me. Is not, therefore, always room for hope? We never
know when the soul of a Grand Master is touched and in
that hour his life is transformed. The Hermit was right:
The Prophecy by itself said nothing that was inexorable. How one reads it was all that mattered. And, do not forget, it is what you are inside that governs how you read the outside. Once the Grand Master is purified within he will see the world in a different light. (TCTR 263)

As the saying goes ‘Patience pays’, the essence of the Great Yogeshwara’s teaching lies in waiting for an internal change in the Grand Master. With the Great Yogeshwara’s assurance, that he will always be with him, the nameless-One steps on to the raft to meet the challenges of the new city.

It is clear that Joshi is on the side of the common man. His intention, to stand by the less privileged sections of the society, shows his commitment for their betterment. It is their celebrations, worries sorrows and sentiments that he wants to share and support. He, even, accepts them to resist and protest against the oppression of the rulers. With the help of the intellectuals, Joshi mobilizes the masses to carry out a revolutionary movement against the authoritarian government. Naturally everybody expects Joshi to create an atmosphere congenial for the boat men to people down the autocratic rule of the dictatorial Grand Master and establish a proletariat governance of the workers, which hopefully will work for their welfare. But somehow, Joshi, unlike Mr.Ghosh, the income-tax official of ‘The Foreigner’ fame, does not believe in a socialistic pattern of the society.
Instead, he seems to have decided firmly to establish God’s kingdom on the earth.

It seems that, the numerous doubts Joshi had raised through Som Bhasker in ‘The Last Labyrinth’ regarding the existence of God, that is, who is God, what is God, could there really be a God and so on, have gradually brought him on to the path of compromise to peddle on the lines of Gargi, that there is no harm in believing that there is a God. In a theistic society if a person (believes) thinks that he is enjoying His bliss and gets a feeling that he is under His protection, nothing is going to stop him from becoming an advocate of God’s will. One tends to believe that along with time there has come a change in Joshi’s attitude also. Because contrary to the common man’s expectations and aspirations, Joshi banks too much on bringing a change in the thinking of the Grand Master using the sentiment of sacrifice and purification.

In a pluralistic society it is a Herculean task to purify a city suffering from many evil forces. If one looks at the stage of affairs, for that matter, of any city, the feeling one gets is that the Great Yogeshawara should be permanently prepared to receive and train, one after the other, any number of nameless-Ones.

As The City and the River is a political allegory of the contemporary period, all the characters are symbols and representatives of different classes and their actions seem to be
predetermined as per the writer’s convocation. Hence there is a little scope to portray elaborate human relationship with the personified abstractions.

Unlike in his other novels Joshi dons the role of a preacher in *The City and the River*. He takes great pleasure in asserting man’s smallness and mortality in contrast to the God’s vastness and immortality. As *The City and The River* is the last novel of the master’s craftsman, his farewell messages imply that the old order must yield to a new beginning. The novel hints at the supremacy of nature over man’s short span, which reminds Tennyson’s perennial *Brook* that keeps singing, “Men may come and men may go, but I go on forever.”

The novel, *The City and The River* reflects Arun Joshi’s newer path in satire and allegory. As R.K.Dhawan remarks it, “is evidence of Joshi’s ‘road not taken’, for in this work he turns his focus from the private to the public. And in this, he is following the contemporary vogue of writing a political novel with a theme that holds good for all times.” The novelist fails in characterization. The characters do not develop spontaneously. They lack psychological depths. Arun Joshi leaves them as archetypes than developing them into individual characters. However, as Anup Beniwal quotes it, “the novel is a powerful and pungent comment on the political scenario that was, that has been that shall be. This novel surely claims a pride of place among the political novels of today.”