THE CITY AND THE RIVER

In *The City and The River*, Arun Joshi uses parable as a fictional mode to convey political satire. It powerfully comments on the political scenario of 1970s. This novel, his fifth and the last one, is different from his earlier novels in thematic concerns. Though Arun Joshi takes up his favourite existentialist issues in the novel also, he sees them through the spectacles of politics and thereby elevates the novel, *The City and The River* to the level of political – allegorical satire.

The novel is a severe commentary on the times as it contains echoes of the Indian emergency of 1974-75. O.P.Mathur remarks that, “The Indian political scenario of the Emergency period is in many respects paralleled in the novel”. (Mathur, 149) It is a severe indictment of the corruption and malpractices of political leaders, business men, the police and armed chiefs. Siddhartha Sharma has great praise for the novel when he says, “It rightly claims a privileged place among the political novels of our literature as it powerfully comments on the political scenario of the past, the present and the future”. (Sharma, 104)

The theme of the novel spans its political, sociological and mythical dimensions in a world and transcends its contemporaneity. The novel contains archetypal characters rather than recognizable human
beings. The politics in *The City and The River* is an allegory of the Emergency of India. First it broadens out into the generalities of politics and then into the higher and metaphysical dimensions. Generalities of politics include art of attaining power and then retaining it.

Unmistakable similarities are found between India’s National Emergency of the 70s and the one portrayed in *The City and The River*. Close resemblance between the power structure of the two is noticed. The way the Grand Master acquired unlimited powers is reminiscent of what happened during the Emergency period. Grandmaster desire to make his son ruler of the country echoes what the then Prime Minister did. Beautification of the City of Delhi during Emergency by widening the streets gets reflected in the demolition of poor people’s huts. ‘The Era of Ultimate Greatness’ of the Grand Master suggests the ‘Twenty-Point Programme’ during the Indian Emergency. Enforcement of discipline, strict control of the Media, compulsory family planning and many such issues in the novel are reminiscent of the Emergency period.

The novel deals with the rule of the Grand Master, his becoming King, the reign of terror, people’s rebellion, the declaration of an Era of Ultimate Greatness, the repressive measures adopted by the king and finally the destruction of the city. The Era of Ultimate Greatness has the
same effect as the rule of Emergency. The novel revolves round the story of the City by the river. The narrative framework of the novel is mythical and the story is told by an old wise teacher, a Guru to his disciple preparing him to enter a new world after the complete destruction of an old city. The Guru is the Great Yogeshwara and the disciple is the Nameless-one, who is to be sent to another similar world, a new city, which springs on the ruins of the old. The Great Yogeshwara wants to tell his disciple about the past city and the cause of its end before the Nameless-one enters the new world.

Set in an imaginary locals, the scene of action is a Nowhere City. It spreads along the river and has a three-tier structure. It can be seen that the city is obviously contemporary because of its division into so many classes and social stratifications - giving birth to political trickery and the resultant conflict spoils the very health of the city. The city represents the city state governed by the Grand Master, who runs if with the assistance of a Council of Advisers. These Councillors include the Minister of Trade, the Education Advisor, the Master of Rallies, the Astrologer and the Commissioner of police. The river symbolizes the endless flow of life. The real sons of the river are the boatmen living in mud – houses that lie scattered by the river on the outskirts of the city. Administrators, intellectuals and the middle class people inhabit the
Brick colonies. While the actual seat of power is Seven Hills. The Grand Master lives on the highest hill whereas the ministers occupy the other hills according to their position.

The pyramids that preserve the dead bodies of the previous Grand Masters and the Gold Mines which is a huge dungeon are the other landmarks where the state prisoners are confined to undergo inhuman physical and psychological torture. The way the individuals are picked up and condemned to rot in the Gold Mines is reminiscent of the punishment during the emergency in India.

The Grand Master has grown up in the palace where his family has lived for seventy years. It seems to him that people lose faith in him and they have become unreasonable and mutinous. The boatmen seem to most unreasonable. The Astrologer and the Grand Master make new formula that might win back their allegiance.

In the past their efforts have always succeeded, but with the passage of time it has become difficult to discover new formulas and the populace has begun to appear more and more unruly in the Grand Master’s eyes. Until, finally, in the year of this chronicle, soon after he dreamt his dreams, he told the Astrologer it was no use warming stale dishes and the time had come to settle the question of allegiance once and for all. (13)
However, life goes on smoothly until the Grand Master has a dream, one night, that he becomes the king of the city but surrounded by boatmen ready to attack him. The astrologer interprets the dream as the coming of a king and that the present Grand Master will be the king of the city in future.

There is some anonymity about the character of the novel. The majority of the characters are not known by their personal names but by the positions they hold in the hierarchy of the rule. City and the river are not given any names. Even those who are known by their personal tags have rather connotative names. The characters, nevertheless, represent not only the types but also individuals.

The Grand Master has his eyes fixed upon becoming the king of the city and all his actions are directed toward the achievement of this goal. Quite often, it seems to him, that people lose faith in him, become unreasonable and turn mutinous. He finds an obvious threat in the rebelliousness of the boatmen. Their large numbers pose danger both to the city and the palace.

The question of allegiance raised by the Grand Master is the first step to consolidate his position. The boatmen assert their allegiance to the river and it starts a conflict between them and the Grand Master. There is a need for the Grand Master to bring people to his side and
suppress rebellion of the boatmen. The Astrologer is the arch designer to somehow convince boatmen to accept the Grand Master. The Astrologer tries to convince the boatmen to accept the Grand Master as their benevolent servant sent by the gods themselves. The boatmen assert their allegiance only to the river, because, “They consider themselves to be the children of the river, and to the river, and river alone do they hold allegiance”. (14)

The dramatic tension stems from the struggle between the Grand Master and the Boatmen. Boatmen are poor but they are more in number and the number goes on increasing. To reduce their population mainly the Grand Master enforces family planning and passes a regulation that these should be only one child to a mother or to a home. This is an echo of what has happened during the Emergency.

Comparing the rule of the Grand Master and the emergency period in India, Siddhartha Sharma makes a forceful point when he says, “Tyranny and repression, hypocrisy and deceit, selfishness and corruption, violence and destruction are rampant in the “City” of the Grand Master. The events portrayed are reminiscent of the emergency in India, as the aftermath in both the case proved ruinous to the rulers”. (Sharma, 82) At the advice of the Astrologer, declaration is made regarding the “Triple Way” or the Way of Three Beatitudes”. This
means the implementation of his tyranny in the city. All these are aimed at the supposed welfare of the state but they are mainly intended to ensure people’s allegiance to the Grand Master.

The Era of Ultimate Greatness turns into the Era of gloom and suppression for the boatmen. It simply means the spread of awe and terror in the city. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants, driven out into the country-side, the castle, machine-gunned and the huts set on fire with bullets. This is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry. This is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. The motive behind the New Era is tyrannical rule in the city and his ambition to become the king of the city. The Grand Master is surrounded by the Council of Advisors whose aim in life is to remain in the glare of publicity and improve their hierarchical standing in the administrative ranking system. The kingpins in this strategy are the main trio of the Police Commissioner, the Education Advisor, and the Master of Rallies. This refers to the coterie who guided the “Supreme” during the Emergency. As Brahmadutt Sharma remarks, “The malpractices resorted to in order to gain and retain power and the malpractices resorted to in order to eliminate dissent. The responses of the victims range from total surrender to uncompromising resistance”. (Sharma, 241)
The Era of Ultimate Greatness is inaugurated with the arrest of a boatman and a clown who had laughed at the Grand Master. The incident fills the citizens with “fear and foreboding”. Bhumiputra, also known as Master Bhoma, a Mathematics teacher, is arrested but not found in jail or outside. Search goes on to find him by Professor, his teacher. Finally the police report says that he is carried away by a group of armed men by force which proves that Bhoma is involved in an outrageous conspiracy against the Grand Master. The innocent professor on this humanist quest, is witness to the sordid underhandedness of the administrative equipment that the Grand Master oversees. On the whole, the Master is a clumsy, good-natured fellow, who governs without unpleasant impositions and believes in exemplary mildness as the solution to the most important details of a matter of state problems. The all-knowing Astrologer keeps the kingdom in his grip.

The elite Ministers and Councillors practise Bad Faith. Their collusion with the Grand Master in propounding and practising the principles of The Era of Ultimate Greatness is conscious and willing. They are aware of their wrong doings but are faithful enough to the Grand Master to implement his wishes and commands. Life, for the Grand Master and the Members of his Council, is a saga of intrigues for dictatorship whereas for the boatmen, it is a heroic struggle to defend a spiritual tradition.
The events of the Emergency period of India are vividly and unmistakably found in the novel. The significant one is the total surrender to the “Supreme” as in the emergency period. The country has dictatorship, inspite of the façade of democracy at the top. Naturally, the ruler, though a dictator is supposed to be elected by a few. There is no legislative body and no functional judiciary. Administration is run by a coterie of persons known as the Council of Advisors at the top and a police force to maintain law and order. The Indian Emergency had, no doubt, both legislatures and judiciary. These bodies, however, are fast becoming subservient to the top most person and thus lose their identity. There are internal rivalries and latent ambitions but the members of the Council are firm in their allegiance to the Grand Master who is in perfect control except for the boat people whose allegiance is to the River.

The Grand Master is not happy with the boat people, and they are above the reach of his manipulative skills. The boat people openly refuse to take the oath of allegiance to the Grand Master. The Grand Master is worried about a nightmare he had about the boat people menacingly advancing towards his throne. He finds in the rebelliousness of the boatmen an obvious threat: “Their insolence, already great, has crossed all limits. At the slightest excuse they raise their rebellious standards and not a day passes when the streets are not filled with their vulgar din…They are disgrace.” (15-16)
Of all the people, the boatmen who lead an authentic existence in the Hiedggerian sense in as much as they mock the threats and dangers announced on them by the Grand Master and his coterie. For Heidegger, genuine existence is existence which dares to death. As Heidegger puts it, “…own past must take shape and significance in relation to ‘his’ inevitable last tomorrow”. (Grene, 270) Of all his subjects, the Grand Master considers the boat people to be the most unreasonable. “The brick-people can be talked to, cajoled, distracted, and, if necessary, threatened. In any case their numbers are small. …It is the boatmen whom he finds both incomprehensible and stubborn”. (13-14)

The boatmen headed by the woman headman rebel against the Grand Master. They are not to owe their allegiance to him. They disregard the Triple Way or the Way of the Three Beautitudes which are supposed to improve the welfare of the state. The boatmen rebel against the Grand Master’s regulation to reduce population and under the leadership of the head Boatman. The head boatman warns the Astrologer against such crooked announcements to befool people:

You think that an ant is born on this earth without God’s will? If it is His will that there should be only one child to a mother then surely it shall come to pass. There is no need for the Grand Master or you to pass a law… You said that the wealth of the city belongs to the people…let the city’s wealth be put to use for the benefit of all. (20)
The Astrologer fails to win the allegiance of the head boatman to his side. The head boatman argues that restricting their population is not required in a State which had no dearth for anything. The Era of Ultimate Greatness breaks their traditional rites. He hates music and at his orders all musical instruments of the boatmen are destroyed. In such an atmosphere of awe and terror, comes the Festival of the Great River. In the boat race the boatmen are not allowed to race barebodied. They have to wear sport-shirts supplied by the Astrologer and they have also to salute the Grand Master. Thus they oppose the colonial tendency of the king: “…the boatmen’s salute to the Grand Master was a new idea. All their lives for ages beyond memory, boatmen had saluted the great river who was their mother”. (90)

At the Festival the Astrologer performs a Yajna “…in the tongue that no one understood”.(96) in which he substitutes the hymn of the great river with another composition that speaks of the greatness of kings and their indispensability to the earth. At this the Hermit of the Mountain, who had been his fellow disciple at the cottage of Great Yogeshwara, stands up in anger and informs the Astrologer in the same tongue that he has committed sacrilege. After the Hermit’s departure the son of the Grand Master is crowned and the police is asked to cheer him up but there is very cold response because “…the multitude was either
confused or unwilling”. (102). Soon Dharma, the Professor, and hundreds of boatmen are arrested and sent to the gold mines because their lips had not moved during the oath taking ceremony after the coronation of the Son. The Master of Rallies is also to be jailed because of his failure to present live telecast of the programme. To avoid the torture he commits suicide.

The Grand Master is not content with consolidating his position only. He wants his son also to ascend the throne after him. Like all dictators, he seeks to elevate himself first by becoming the King and then to ensure the succession of his son to the throne through his sycophants who plead the supremacy of the heredity and the natural superiority of the higher castes. This reminds one of what happened during Emergency to promote hereditary rule. “The politics in the novel is an allegory not only of the Emergency, but it broadens out first into the generalities of politics which, as is often said, consists of the art of attaining power and the craft of retaining it, and then into the higher ethical and metaphysical dimensions”. (Mathur, 150)

Grand Master seeks to ensure that he is succeeded by his descendent. Rallies Minister has to organize such rallies to the Grand Master and to his son as well to give an impression to the people that he too has endeared himself to the masses. The Rallies Master tells the journalist: “And now, journalist, I must gather rallies not only for the
Grand Master but his son as well. The city must now face its final humiliation and I must be an instrument to it”. (76) The role of the Astrologer is to put forth 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 has 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, its very all for the sake of this city. They have suffered endless privation just so that this city might prosper. Such is the family that we are asking this sacrifice of and we have no doubt that the Grand Master will listen to our pleadings. This city needs his son and he must give him to us. (101)

Meanwhile, the commissioner of the city hatches a conspiracy under which he gets the photograph of about fifty sturdy young boatmen armed with spears, daggers, bows and arrows, and with this photograph he proves his vigilance in the city for which the Grand Master elevates him to “the Rank of the Minister for Trade”. (119) And the final report proves Bhoma to be a great conspirator who has many ring leaders as his followers.
The power struggle makes the Grand Master despotic and those who oppose him are put into the Gold Mines and are subjugated to personal afflictions. The strange prophecy which challenges the authority of the Grand Master comes to pass on the day of Festival of River, when the son of Grand Master is offered a crown and the ritual coronation is accomplished.

The Professor knows that all reports about the Headman’s conspiracy are fake and decides to tell the truth to the people. For this purpose he begins a free lottery Stall. But his bare facts do not attract good gathering. Later a boy, who is identified as Shailaja’s brother and Bhoma’s student, comes forward to tell the truth through the fable of the king. When the headman of the boatpeople takes up the Professor’s mission, she is also arrested and sent to the Gold Mines. Despite many kinds of torture she does not accept the Grand Master’s rules. She tells the Astrologer, “I spit on you and I spit on the Grand Master”. (164)

When Professor takes up his anguished search for his vanished student, Bhoma, he is able to find “some lost bit of himself”. The Professor discovers that he belongs to the brick people and not to the boatmen as he thinks so. He accepts the river as his mentor guiding him to his life’s purpose. He develops friendship with a ten year old nameless child, who assisted the Professor in his search for Bhoma.
Now he is pleasantly surprised to learn that the little boy is none other than the human incarnation of a star he has been studying through his telescope all these years. He searches for Bhoma everywhere and is shocked by the corruption, tyranny, degeneration and repression of the City.

When the Professor fails to find Bhoma and his search becomes futile, he leaves the city. The sight of shrunken boatmen huddled together and lying like heaped animals moves him so much that he starts crying. He loses faith in his city and civilization. He cries out to the men: “Forgive me, I have spent my life in sleep. My life has been a joke, even as the lives of brick-people are a joke. God gave me life that I might serve this earth. I have squandered it on baubles”. (163) The novelist shows how a democratic set up can be misused and replaced by dictatorship. It is evident that the Grand Master stands neither for dictatorship nor democracy. Professor desires a political system in which the ruler does not oppress people, and on his death bed, he has a hope: “There will be no Grand Masters. There will be a new world, a new race of men will be born”. (167) As Subhash Chandra aptly remarks, “Arun Joshi, therefore, in his novel, The City and The River, is dealing with the universal predicament of the modern man, besieged as he is by debilitating forces”. (Chandra, 271)
Though not a boatman by birth, the Professor sets himself to the task of uplifting the depressed and sinking souls of the imprisoned boatmen. Along with the Headman, Little Star and Shailaja’s brother, he goes from dungeon to dungeon and tries to lighten their burden by reciting to them the story of the naked king. He embarks on a protest fast on the inhuman blinding of the Headman by the Astrologer. He remains calm though he sinks. He assures his friends and associates: “This evil cannot last. There must be a new beginning – There will be no Grand Masters. There will be a new world, a new race of men will be born. I shall watch from wherever I am”. (167) Having performed his duty, the Professor dies in peace. His death becomes the sacrificial fire to burn down the egoism, selfishness and stupidity in the city and triggers off an open rebellion of the boat-people against the Grand Master who, no doubt, succeeds in suppressing it only to be drowned in the upsurging river.

The people of the city have no belief in the report on Bhoma and become enraged. Bhoma’s disappearance from the scene leads to the arrest of Patanjali, as a substitute to him. The rule of the New Era is if the actual person evades arrest, then his immediate neighbour would be picked up. Dharma, the police officer, who arrested Patanjali, tells him to make an apology and that he would be set free immediately. He replies: “But why should I apologize for making such absurd rules”, (26) revealing his uncompromising courage.
Every night a few boatmen are picked up and transported to the Gold Mines—the dark, dingy, suffocating underground jail where a long detention causes a slow but steady decay of body and mind and where “...the idea of the self suitably dissolved”. (161) The boatmen feel that they have become “orphans in an evil world”. (144) In a few weeks the number of the missing becomes frighteningly large. In the frustration they decide to capitulate and take the Astrologer’s oath if things do not improve. Those who swear allegiance to the Grand Master are safe in the city. The others are delivered to the Gold Mine. Thus it has become a regular feature for the police to the pick up a few boatmen, imprison them in the ghoulish Gold Mines, fire upon and kill them. “Even if the king is naked, the parable tells them, nothing whatsoever, can be done about it, because to be ruled by a naked king is their only fate”. (176) The misery of the boatmen increases with the escalating tyranny of the Grand Master.

The Astrologer, in his speech, praises the family of the Grand Master for a hundred years sacrifice of its men and women and wealth etc. for the sake of the city. The reference could be to Nehru’s family. When the Grand Master identifies himself with the nation, to Shankar Kumar, “It is perhaps an ironical reference to the slogan during the Emergency—“Indira is India”. (Kumar, 145) The novelist seems to
satirize the efforts of the Astrologer as if he forces power on the king and the pretensions of the king, accepting it, though, unwillingly, as an obligation to the country to make his son the next king.

Minister for Trade remarks: “At one go every tradition of the city is abandoned. But even that does not satisfy the Grand Master. He must crown the son as well, make him an heir apparent above the heads of all of us, put him on the Advisory Council, and, in days to come, train him for a thousand mischief”. (111) The Grand Master, like any despotic ruler, desires to elevate himself by becoming the king. Next comes the wish to ensure succession of his son to the throne. Consolidating his position and making his son to ascend the throne after him are the two goals before the Grand Master.

Joshi’s *The City and The River* continues to treat, in its own ironical manner, the predicament of his characters in a hostile world. The crisis of the individual, however, has been replaced by the socio-political crisis of the city, which is a conglomerate of individuals and can be said to represent the whole humanity. In this novel also, Joshi poses significant questions about identity, commitment and faith. But these questions are approached from the standpoint of politics. The novel also throws significant sidelights on relevance of meaning in life. (Pathak, 63)
The Grand Master makes another attempt to gain popularity and this time it is in the form of the Festival of the River. He wants the Astrologer again to take an oath of allegiance from the people.

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

In this struggle, I shall hold my allegiance to the Grand Master and to no one else. If I break this covenant, entered this day of the Festival of the Great River, may the Great River curse me, strike me dead, lay waste my seed for twenty generations. So help me God. (100)

The so called Bhoma conspiracy is published to gain public sympathy and thereby “to change the balance of power”. (111) The tyranny of the Grand Master increases the misery of the boatmen. The condition of the city is unbearable. The Professor, Shailaja’s brother and the Headmen arrested and detained in the Gold Mines. The lottery stall which stands for protest and defiance of authority, is pulled down, but the Grand Master fails to contain the resistance.

The Gold Mines are infact, dark dungeons where any hope is gradually dissolved in the darkness. Plunged into suffering and torture, they bear all the injustice inflicted upon them by the rulers. The head man is blinded by them and Professor undertakes a fast until his death to oppose the despot, the Grand Master. Meanwhile, owing to a road
accident Bhoma has a lucky escape from police custody. In a chance encounter, with a journalist he learns that information about the professor can be obtained at his rose farm. Bhoma goes there and meets the professor’s father, lovingly called ‘grand father’ by everyone. The other inmates of the farm, Dharma, the professor’s nephew, Shailaja, his fiancée, Shailaja’s brother and Shani, the grand nephew of the professor, take an instant liking to Bhoma.

Bhoma finds the meaning of his life not in escape but in action, and he turns into a dedicated man of action. Under his guidance a campaign is launched for the release of the Headman. The persuasions fail and the boatmen go on strike. The strike moves peacefully when unexpectedly “shock brigade” of the Education Advisor offers unconditional support despite Bhoma’s unwillingness and the movement turns violent.

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. (182)

The Grand Master and his men create a sinister world, a demonic world, demanding sacrifices, punishing the rebels, and destroying life. The military atrocities are committed upon the innocent poor. Seeing
this violence and meaningless destruction of properties, Bhoma decides to withdraw the movement.

Meanwhile, the Minister for Trade and the Education Advisor involve them in another conspiracy to oust the Grand Master and grab the power for themselves. And the very next night the gold mines are broken and all the prisoners are set free. But during the following night two hundred sleeping boatmen are brutally killed and thrown into the river. This obviously leads to open clashes between the boatmen and Grand Master’s forces.

The Headman is blinded in the Gold Mines. The Professor, in his fast unto death, dies in the process as he declines to take any food or drink. Adopting a very tough attitude, the Rose Garden is attacked with all military splendor. Grand Father, Bhumiputra and Dharma who all live in the Rose Garden are perished.

While all this is going on, the Grand Master holds a secret meeting in an underground chamber of the pyramids at night. He becomes the King and appoints the Minister for Trade as the new Grand Master of the city. While the Seven Hills celebrate the Grand Master’s ascension to the throne, an unequal war rages between the boatmen and the army. The boatmen, Bhumiputra and those who side with him are perished. Shailaja’s brother is so much shocked by the brutal killings that he commits suicide. The Hermit of the Mountain performs a yajna
for the peace of the departed souls. He gathers the boatmen on the bank of the river and recites some mantras to correct the wrong done by the Astrologer on the inaugural day of the New Era. He realizes the truth of the prophecy and knows that the end of the city is imminent and that there is no time left to mend.

For the Great Hermit, it is not difficult to guess the future of the city. While the suppression goes on, the Great Hermit notices a change in the river. “The sky had once again become overcast. The clouds hung low and they were black. More clouds were rolling in from the horizon. Below him the river was rising”. (227) The river continues to rise. There comes a flood in the river and the king finds himself helpless in the face of it. “all of a sudden the river was not a river any more… The inmates of the palace shuddered in horror as the new Grand Master’s building broke in the middle and flood by floor, frame by frame, fell into the sea. One last wave uprooted the foundations and sent them flying into the sky”. (257)

All of them perish in the river water. The Hermit performs his last yajna and he is blessed with vision:

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. (249)
It looks as if the river is “turned into an ancient sea, like the sea that first condensed on the whirling planet a billion years ago”. (257) After seven days and seven nights of continuous downpour, the sun rises on a vast sea of water, giving “…no hint of the agitation that had gone into its making”. Nothing of the Grand Master and his city remains”. (260) As Usha Banda remarks, “In its demonic image, the city becomes the city of destruction, a great ruin of pride”. (Banda, 275) The river consumes the whole city barring one child so that he may tell the truth in future. In the words of Subhash Chandra, “Death and destruction overtake those who are selfless and self-sacrificing as well as those who are self-seeking and ambitious. But it does not make the vision of the novel somber”. (Chandra, 272) Only an illegal child of the boatmen, as Amur remarks, “…escapes from the deluge to lead, like shishumar of the Indian myths, another resistance at another point in history”. (Amur, 19)

Though the boatmen’s struggle bears a close affinity to a political upheaval, their fight is not for temporal benefits but for truth. At the end, the boatmen along with their headman, are charred to ashes and are pushed down the ebbing river. The Grand Master-turned king makes a clean sweep of the opposition and the site bears a gruesome spectacle. It looks as though Nature uses water to punish the guilty, when human
beings fail to do so. Dark clouds loom large. The river swells menacingly to transform itself into a “veritable sea”. It rains for seven days and seven nights to leave no trace of the Grand Master and his city. Even as one feels the reaction of the fluvial goddess to be a bit too contrived, it may be noted that cataclysmic floods are a part of all great mythologies.

Although the city is washed away, the cyclic march of humanity continues. On the ruins of the city, a new city springs up. The river flows on eternally, and the city is ruled by the Seven Hills, by another set of councilors. The conflict is eternal. The Great Yogeshwara explains this phenomenon to the Nameless-One, which speaks of human continuity thus.

On the ruins of that city, as always happens, a new city has risen. It is ruled by another Great Master, which, of course, need not always happen. In the new city is another Professor, another Bhumiputra, another tribe of boatmen. There is another’s Council and another set of Councillers. The men have other names but the forces they embody remain unchanged. And into all this where 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 Start. (262)
The Great Yogeshwar teaches the Name-less that man can be happy only by giving up his egoism, selfishness and stupidity. He finally suggests some remedial measures for the survival of the new city and reveals the secret of the rebellion: “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”. (263) Arun Joshi seems to have been influenced by the *Bhagavadgita* and the Indian mythology in shaping the thematic structure of the novel. The cycle of “Karma” will move on until the Divine scheme is accomplished. But the same is to be achieved through human instrumentality.

This novel also ends on a note of hope and affirmation. It’s affirmations are forceful and fundamental. R.S.Pathak considers *The City and the River* “…far more optimistic than Joshi’s earlier novels”. (Pathak, 78) The conflict between the City and the River in the novel is a conflict between two opposing worldviews—the one evil, self-centred and materialistic, and the other purified, selfless and cosmic. In the words of Subash Chandra, Arun Joshi deals with “the universal predicament of the modern man, besieged as he is by debilitating forces”. (Chandra, 271) The novel, however, ends on an optimistic note and full of hope and certainly enlarges the vision of the reader by making him aware of the causes of this eternal conflict and suggesting
solution in the form of Great Yogeshwara’s advice to the Nameless-One. He sends his disciple to teach people the significance of prayer, faith and understanding to the new city. O.P. Mathur strongly believes that *The City and The River* also is an affirmative novel, and its affirmations are more forceful and fundamental, for they broaden out, projecting the relations of man with other men, with nature and with God…” (Mathur, 147-148) In the words of Tapan Kumar Ghosh,

> Indeed, as a re-affirmation of Indian and as an experiment of the parable as fictional mode to convey mythic truths and political satire. *The City and The River* is a remarkable tour de force in contemporary Indian English fiction.

(Kumar, 173)

In his political novel *The City and The River*, Arun Joshi presents the malpractices in which people wielding political power usually indulge and the ways in which the oppressed people respond to them. The responses of the victims range from total surrender to uncompromising resistance.

The events portrayed in the novel are reminiscent of the Emergency in India. The novel does not offer any solution to the problem as to what kind of political system is safe for the people. The novelist does not suggest any alternative political system but wishes for one in which there is no oppression. Subash Chandra remarks that the
novel seems “…to teach people to fight for their freedom and authenticity. The oppression goes on, but so does the fight against it”.

(Chandra, 272).

There are unmistakable parallels between the Emergency period of 1974-75 in India and the one portrayed in the novel. Acquisition of unlimited powers, projection of the son as the heir, presence of a coterie of self-seeking sycophants, beautification of the city of Delhi, bulldozing huts for widening of the streets, twenty-point programme, illogical family planning, loss of individual freedom, press censorship, arbitrary arrests etc. are some of issues associated with Emergency that find unambiguous presentation in the novel and make it a severe commentary on the Emergency period of India. Thus it is a political novel that fuses satire as well as philosophical discussion.
WORKS CITED


