HUMAN PREDICAMENT AND SALVATION

The City and the River, Joshi’s last novel, came out some ten years after The Last Labyrinth, a considerable span of time if one takes into consideration that the novelist took only a little more than a decade to publish his other four novels, a collection of short stories and a book illustrating the history of the philanthropic institution he worked for. The passage from the eighties to the nineties in India, however, marks a significant shift in the tastes and orientation of the reading public as far as fiction written in English was concerned. The arrival, and enormous success, of Rushdie’s novels had caused ferment in what had been a static situation and it is likely that The City and the River embodied a turn in Joshi’s literary output, partly in an effort to exploit the new vogue. Of all the author’s novels, in fact, The City and the River is the one which can best be described as a “fictional experiment”, despite the fact that this label was used for his other works of his, The Apprentice in particular.

The novel records the gloomy story that the Great Yogeshwara recounts to a disciple, the nameless one, in order to explain who he is, to find the self’s identity. Joshi makes use of the same device of one-sided dialogue that he employed in The Apprentice, where Ratan emptied his conscience to the National Cadet. Differently from the
former novel, however, the teller’s detachment from the story, due in part to the fact that he is now a witness of the events rather than the protagonist, runs the risk of mirroring the author’s attitude. As a consequence, the narrative fails to grip the reader’s attention and the critical reception it was given was lukewarm. Following the vogue of Midnight’s Children, The City and the River tries to exhume the legends of ancient Indian epics—chiefly the Upanishads, in which an old sage teaches a lesson in life to a talented disciple, which seemingly is the means to find the identity in the state of the identitylessness because one suffers from the identity conflict—and incorporate them within a postmodern structure and significance. As is already evident in the title, the book emphasises two separate and hostile worlds, another interpretation of the typical dichotomy in Joshi’s vision: the Bombay and the Benares of The Last Labyrinth, the Delhi and the Maikala Hills of The Strange Case of Billy Biswas.

The story told here is that after a disturbing dream reflecting the identity crisis, interpreted as a harbinger of problems by the Astrologer, the Great Master of the City resolves to strengthen his authority. Surrounding him with a group of ambitious, sycophant ministers, he tries to win the boatmen’s sympathies. They represent the other pole in the city, the poor who still live according to tradition and have made an alliance with the River. Nevertheless, they are not taken
in by the Great Master’s cajoling, who consequently feels the need to employ stronger measures to make the boatmen submit: mass imprisonment, torture, even total destruction.

In *The City and the River*, the fifth and the last novel, Joshi exhibits his narrative skill in the use of the Stream of Consciousness technique, especially in the delineation of the individual’s estranged plight, his psychical encounter with reality resulting to identity crisis.

The Master of Rallies, a child of boatman, for example, is “an unhappy man” (Joshi, *The City and River* 71) and the real cause of his unhappiness is rootlessness—the lack of identity.

He appears as “tired” (Joshi, *The City and River* 76), “afraid of humiliation” (Joshi, *The City and River* 75) and at “no peace” (Joshi, *The City and River* 76). He consequently remarks: “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” (Joshi, *The City and River* 75). The question is not that he is suffering but the real question is as to why he suffers and what are the causes and factors behind his sufferings and why he thinks himself to be lineated from this world of materialism.

The professor, a star watcher and a teacher of Master Bhoma, apart from his scholarship, is weary and also tired and confesses: “I am
tired of being careful...I am weary” (Joshi, The City and 87). His search for Bhumiputra “had turned into a search for some lost lit of himself” (Joshi, The City and 159) His quest leads him to imprisonment at Gold Mines. He expresses in disgust: “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...I have squandered it on baubles” (Joshi, The City and 163). In extreme sorrow, he mourns: “I am lost” (Joshi, The City and 163).

Crushed by solitudes and weight of human misery, even Bhumiputra, a teacher of Mathematics and disciple of professor, “felt very alone” (Joshi, The City and 157). He was forced to roam in wilderness, after having the feeling of “wandering through a desert land” (Joshi, The City and 176). Like Sindi Oberoi in the Foreigner, Bhumiputra finds the meaning of his life not in escape but in action. He decides to fight own grandmother. He excites the demoralised boatmen by reminding them that they are children of the sacred river and they should not sell their soul to a man, however powerful he may be. But soon: “A sense of overwhelming futility filled him at such times, so much so that he saw no point in living” (Joshi, The City and 174). Sometime, he feels “so old and lonely and useless” (Joshi, The City and 150).
In the above paragraph, it seems that as a character, the protagonist is alienated, but the socio-psycho measures, if adopted, reflect the very reality of the human life, that every individual on earth has to suffer and to suffer not in a single way but in multi-faceted ways because of the multi-dimensional factors. Worldly things were with the Lord Buddha he could have hired the whole empire of his father, but the destiny and the identity that he was to acquire was something different than what he was to inherit. The enlightenment of the Buddha was not the result of the comforts of life; rather it was a by-product of the identity crisis. For realisation, identity, the identity crisis was inevitable.

Here, like Virginia Woolf, Joshi uses the conventional devices of character delineation in series of internal monologues, to give the readers an easy access to the character’s neurotic mind.

The City and the River (1990), is a study of existential predicament of its prominent characters. The prominent characters in it carry with them a sense of alienation, loneliness and pessimism because of the identity crisis. They are in search of the identity—a meaning to life. The novel depicts the existential dilemma of its characters in a hostile world. But this predicament, 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.

The novel is divided into eleven sections, including a Prologue and an Epilogue. It depicts the struggle between the Grand Master and the Boatmen. The Grand Master, who rules the City by the river, is determined to become its unchallenged king. His intentions are reinforced by an old prophecy. The Grand master demands allegiance from the Boatmen. Master Bhoma, (Bhumiputra) and other rebels stubbornly insist on offering allegiance to the river alone and remain unshaken from their native sanguinity. The Boatmen’s leader, Headman, tells that they owe their allegiance “only to the river” (Joshi, The City and 19). To them, the river is “a symbol of the divine mother, of God himself” (Joshi, The City and 22). They regard themselves as “children of the great river” (Joshi, The City and 19). The Grand Master and the boatmen represent the urge to dominate and the desire to assert one’s identity respectively.

The city, depicted in the novel, is itself rootless and alien to the natural atmosphere. This city abounds in “tall structures of steel and glass” (Joshi, The City and 12) but is “falling apart before our eyes” (Joshi, The City and 199). City’s atmosphere is so unnatural that neither grass nor flowers grow on the Seven Hills. It is aptly stated: “In the city’s newly laid parks and along its well-straightened avenues
and on the Seven Hills, however, in spite of the chief horticulturist’s strenuous efforts, and to the Grand Masters great regrets, neither grass nor flowers grow” (Joshi, The City and 136).

In this “city of wonders” (Joshi, The City and 31), the palace lawns “leave much to be desired. All brown and yellow. No trees, no flowers. Not a patch of green” (Joshi, The City and 31). In city, “The road was wide and well-paved but it was treeless and without flowers” (Joshi, The City and 31). The people, except boatmen, are generally “subdued and not in their normal self” (Joshi, The City and 96). There is “nothing to change, no new idea to survive” (Joshi, The City and 55) in the city. In it, “nothing was moving in the right direction or, if anything was, it moved at a snail’s pace” (Joshi, The City and 55) and, hence, everyone “was waiting for something to happen” (Joshi, The City and 55). “Chaos is piled upon chaos” (Joshi, The City and 180) is the final impression of the city.

The identity crises that Arun Joshi envisages here are not one but two. The external identity crisis that emerges is because of the artificiality of the “city” itself. The modernisation and the urbanisation that have taken place in modernised India are the replica of the identity conflict and themeaninglessness in the city. What the hell one will do with the “real estate” and the building with glasses if one cannot have few free natural oxygen-- the reality of life.
The city itself is the symbol of the rootlessness. Arun Joshi, while writing the novel, must have perceived the subjective reality of the objective contemporary society of modern times and thus makes the issues of identity, and identity conflict more prominent in today’s world than it would have been during the period of Arun Joshi.

In such a setting, the characters feel their existence to be rootless, are absurd and are in search for something meaningful. Life seems to them merely “a strange sorry tale” (Joshi, *The City and 10*) comprising “pointless episodes” (Joshi, *The City and 10*), interwoven with the conflict of the identity and the identity quest.

The Master of Rallies, a child of boatman, for example, is “an unhappy man” (Joshi, *The City and 71*) and the real cause of his unhappiness is rootlessness, as described in the words: “His misfortune lay in the fact that instead of teaching him how to row a boat his parents had wanted him to join the ranks of the brick-people. For fifteen years, they spent all their earnings on him. The Master of Rallies was good at studies but after fifteen years when he completed them, like the Education Advisor, he too discovered that no one wanted his services. The boatmen did not have the money to hire him; the brick-people considered him an upstart (Joshi, *The City and 71*). His alienation and rootlessness have been caused the conflict between modernisation and the traditionalism.
The case of the Grand Master is not very different. The Minister for Trade frankly tells the Grand Master that he is “tired” (Joshi, The City and 203) and that in his weariness he lets his dark thoughts assail him. The notes of music disturb him. He hears “within its notes the echoes of a mocking laugh” (Joshi, The City and 203). According to M. Mani Meithei, “It is his inordinate desire to become a king that leads him from one chaotic step to another, alienating himself from his subjects” (23). The delay in the prophecy’s fulfilment and the growing anger of the people make the headstrong Grand Master impatient. He suffers from a crisis of trust and grows suspicious of his own advisers: “Who is there in the wider world that I can trust?” (Joshi, The City and 57).

This particular situation is product of the high ambitions and the scenty resources, a typical feather of modern life. In such fast, ambitious world of quick success, the human psychology is bound to get destroyed and ultimately what seagull are the meaninglessness, helplessness and rootlessness. There could be everything in life but seems that nothing is in hand.

Dharma’s father, a profiteer, suffers from a strange kind of disease. He feels like crying, yet cannot cry. He stands before a mirror and raves. A hole appears in his image reflected in the mirror and he begins to think, that “My insides are rotting. I too am vanishing”
(Joshi, *The City and 133). He is damned to suffer from the “Three Truths Syndrome, stasis of the soul. Atrophy of the brain and locomotors functions” (Joshi, *The City and 135). The stiffness of his joints is symptomatic of the hardening of his soul. His condition degenerates each day so much so that “his mind turned blank, and his will was reduced to zero” (Joshi, *The City and 134). His doctor tells him in good faith: “Exercise your soul” (Joshi, *The City and 134) as medical treatment will not cure him.

Dharma, a Police Officer, too, feels alienated amidst the identity conflict, internally and externally torn apart by inward and outward situations. When the Grand trader offers him a silver chair to sit on, he finds it “surprisingly uncomfortable” (Joshi, *The City and 91) Dharma wonders how the Grand Trade is in league with powerful persons with whom he shares his profits. After knowing it, in anguish, he confesses: “For many weeks, he had been having trouble deciding whether he was living in a city that he used to know” (Joshi, *The City and 93).

Thus the prominent characters in the novel suffer from existential predicament for different reasons manifested in the conflict of identity and quest for the same. They suffer from alienation, weariness, boredom, rootlessness and meaninglessness in their lives. In this relentless quest for identity, they withdraw from human ambience to natural environs of peace and tranquillity but here too they find no
response and equanimity. They are nowhere men in quest of a somewhere place. They are tormented by their hollow existence. Joshi is obsessively occupied with the individual’s quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world. It is in turn best depicted as the quest for identity-formation when there is understanding of cause of the conflict and factors behind such crisis of identity.

Existential conflict in Joshi springs from the self’s craving for the fulfilment of certain psycho-emotional needs, from the desire to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of listlessness.

The City and the River, the fifth and last novel of Arun Joshi, has been generally accepted and debated as the political novel by the academicians and the scholars. But it is not only political in nature. It is, rather, interwoven with socio- psychic undercurrents of the conflict in the twin understandings of the civilisation and the culture.

The terms like the “progressive” and “development” have been debated widely among the academicians and the social thinkers alike but the consensus is still far from a particular point of the position. The modern attics and the fast-moving world are the development for some.
But for the majority of the masses, the rural, innocent and honest, may of life, without greed and artificiality, is an ideal.

Industrialisation nobly aimed at betterment of the human society, but the emergence of the post industrial society accompanied by rapid modernisation and urbanisation has brought in chaos and social disorder that have made the human race almost incurably.

Arun Joshi in *The City and the River* deals with an entirely different theme from his earlier novels. In a way, the novel is a continuation of and an improvement upon Joshi’s major thematic concerns. In it, the post-modernist tendency to consider the rural, the natural primitive way of living against the urbanised civilisation is depicted in full depth by the novelist. Fate and freedom, the archetypal conflict of good and evil, the inner map of contemporary civilization, and the undercurrents that shape it, death and regeneration, human choice and its bearing on cosmic context, God’s place in materialistic disposition and glorification of primitivism are some of the motif-strands that the novel fuses into an integral scheme.

The novel is called a political novel. In it, Joshi presents the malpractices in which people wielding political power indulge and the ways in which they not only corrupt themselves but also the society and in this process the identity of the individual is lost. However, it will be an injustice to Joshi, if this fictional work is just taken as a
political novel. The political form has been adopted by the novelist to present a spiritual vision of life. In this context, Tapan Kumar Ghosh rightly observes:

A close study of the book will evince that despite its satires on the present-day political situation, it transcends the realm of political and explores fundamental truths about human life with its spiritual destiny and that its ultimate world-view is not political but mystical or metaphysical (34).

Divinity and primitive elements dominate the whole of *The City and the River*. In it, Joshi makes a successful attempt to show the significance of an inseparable relationship between religion and politics. Like Mahatma Gandhi, he seems to suggest that politics, in absence of religion and truth, will lead only to destruction and death.

*The City and the River*, slightly different from the preceding works, is a step ahead from individuality to universality. In all of his earlier four novels, Joshi focuses on the inner turmoil of the individual protagonists, while in this novel he works on a vast canvas, depicting the predicament of the whole generation or rather the whole race. In it, there is coexistence of the extremes at every level. Hermits, yajnas, sacrifice, and primitive people coexist with electronic surveillance, ultra modern lasers, helicopters, videos, spying and inquisition. And
the novel moves at two levels simultaneously. At one level, it reveals
the ruthless governing of the city by the Grand Master and his fawning
Council of Advisors. At the other level are boatmen like primitive
people who struggle for indictment of the corruption and malpractice
of political leaders, businessmen, the police and the army chiefs.

The Grand Master, along with the hundred years old Astrologer,
the de facto ruler of the city, applies new formulas with the hope of
winning back the people’s allegiance to him. According to the Grand
Master, the boatmen cause so many troubles to him. The boatmen
never let the town planner widen the narrow tortuous streets in which
they live. They spend half of their time on the river-bank in singing,
talking, meditating, and playing on the one-string in primitive ways
and would rather live in penury than to work for anybody else except
themselves. They do not even care to greet the Grand Master.
Therefore, he observes: “Boatmen are not as simple as they seem...
They consider themselves to be the children of the river, and to the
river, and river alone do they hold allegiance. They believe,
unfortunately, with their hearts, and for their beliefs they are willing to
die. And don’t let their poverty mislead you into believing that they
can be bought (Joshi, The City and 14).

The Grand Master is disgusted with the insolent behaviour of the
boatmen. He considers them responsible for having turned the city into
“an unruly place, a plaything of asuras” (Joshi, The City and 15). He feels ashamed for their appalling condition and for their going about half-naked like the primitives. But the boatmen like to live like primitives. They do not believe in personal possessions and they want to lead a simple life. As their headman, who is a woman, tells the Grand Master, “hard work or no...boatmen will get two meals a day” (Joshi, The City and 16) and they expect no more.

The Grand Master is worried about their growing population which is, according to him, a hurdle on his way to a better tomorrow. He tells the Astrologer: “Let their number be frozen by law...the force of arms if necessary” (Joshi, The City and 16), and he asks him to announce a law, “Let there be only one child to a mother or two to a home” (Joshi, The City and 16). The Astrologer proposes to the people: “The way of the Three Beatitudes” (Joshi, The City and 17) to ensure their allegiance to the Grand Master, as if children to their father. But the head Boatman makes it clear to the Astrologer: “The Boatmen...are children of Great River, and only of the great river...How can we become children of the Grand Master or of anyone else? ...If it is a matter of allegiance, our allegiance is only to the river and cannot be shared” (Joshi, The City and 19). She further says in protest: “You think an ant is born on this earth without God’s will? If it is his will that there should be only one child to a mother then surely it
shall come to pass. There is no need for the Grand Master or you to pass a law” (Joshi, The City and 19-20). Even the Astrologer tells the Grand Master that: “The river for them...is a symbol of the divine mother. Of God Himself” (Joshi, The City and 22) and advises him not to be “too harsh with the boatmen. Without them the city cannot run” (Joshi, The City and 22).

The opening of a new era known as “The Era of Ultimate Greatness” (Joshi, The City and 23) is announced by the Astrologer to discipline the people. But the boatmen spurn his “Three Truths”, call him a pompous fool and even burn his effigies along the river banks. The Era of Ultimate Greatness is a parable of evil drunk with power attempting to encroach upon the traditional primitive culture of the boatmen who worship the River and are now forced to take an oath of allegiance to the Grand Master and to salute him in place of River. Boatmen were not ready to salute the Grand Master since: All their lives, for ages beyond memory, boatmen had saluted the great river, and only the great river, who was their mother. They saluted her morning and evening by taking from her a handful of water and letting it run dawn from their close cropped hands. They did not know how to salute a man, be he a Grand Master (90).

Due to such decrees, the boatmen make a revolt. The Astrologer asks the Commissioner to control the agitation. The Commissioner
makes systematic attempts to crush the boatmen’s protest. He commands his officers to arrest the boatmen at night and deliver them to Gold Mines, situated “deep under the Seven Hills, prison for men whose eyes have become too bold or tongue too free” (Joshi, The City and 161). Black cards bearing names of people to be arrested are issued to the police officers, who do not know the nature of their offence. It is typical rule of a lunatic dictator who turns a blind eye to the untold misery of the citizens.

At the Festival of the River, a yajna is performed by the Astrologer and the Grand Master’s son is coroneted as his successor. The Grand Master’s plans, however, meet with stiff resistance from the Boatmen, and Bhumiputra or Master Bhoma, a teacher of mathematics who belongs to the Mud quarters. Hence, a large number of arrests take place. Bhumiputra is held. The Headman, who refuses to swear allegiance to the Grand Master, and the Professor who takes up the cause of Bhumiputra, are condemned to the Gold Mines. Systematic attempts are made to destroy the Boatmen’s way of life. The Grand Master, who hates music, even destroys the simple musical instrument of the Boatmen. The Headman’s eyes are pierced with long needles. The Professor dies trying to draw the attention of the authorities to the atrocities. The attempts of the boatmen, however, are fragile against the laser tanks of the Grand Master.
Now as the dream of the Grand Master is fulfilled, he becomes the unchallenged king of the Seven Hills. The Astrologer becomes the new Grand Master. The Grand Master’s confrontation with man is absolutely over. No man stands in his way, which means the victory of his inhuman apathy. That, however, is not the end, nor is it the purpose of the novelist. When sin surmounts the earth, nature, too, takes its revenge. Nature takes its revenge on all—victims as well as victimizers. After the crude profanation of the sanctity of human race, Nature takes different steps for its rectification. Dark clouds loomed large. The Great River swelled menacingly to transform itself into a “primordial sea” (Joshi, The City and 357). The rain lashed the city without let-up and the water rose up threateningly to the Seven Hills. The King was swallowed up by the river. The avenging process is described thus by Joshi: “For seven days and seven nights it rained without a stop. On the eighth day the sun rose and from a clear sky stared down at the vast sea of water. The sea was calm and gave no hint of agitation that had gone into its making. Of the Grand Master and his city nothing remained” (Joshi, The City and 260).

In this manner, the novel emphasises the presence of the fundamental primitive force of Nature. Meithei too makes the same point when he opines: “The river in this way is indeed the main protagonist which stands out as a formidable spiritual force as old as
Time it-self. It represents the primitive force of Nature that remains indomitable like the Almighty God, as against the corrupting values of man-made civilization” (Joshi, *The City and* 262).

The river swells to take over everything, from the Seven Hills to the tunnel of the pyramids. Everywhere it is the mighty presence of sea of waters that engulfs man and solidity of things are swallowed in its womb till all is levelled whether man or matter. “Here the conflict between civilizing forces and the primitive untamed forces assume the proportion of the cosmic conflict between comparatively weaker man, artificial and vain, and the self generating ceaseless force of Nature or the Supreme God as in classical tragedies” (Joshi, *The City and* 55).

In *The City and the River*, Joshi is successful in presenting a picture of humanity surrounded by natural elements and primitive forces over which man has no control. In it the Human continuity is also communicated through various archetypal symbols. The Hermit is the “old wise man” who is the saviour of the human race. His timely rescue of the illegal child to be rafted across to the great Yogeshwara has a great symbolic significance. The child is the chosen one. But the novel is not a philosophical tract mouthing the utterances of its characters. Its appeal lies in its skilful handling of the course plotted by intrigue and corruption in high places. Also, its readability is enhanced by incisive character details. As events unfold, each of the main actors
becomes a portrait in a gallery. Nevertheless, Joshi’s focus is on human predicament and salvation of mankind through divinity in *The City and the River*. 