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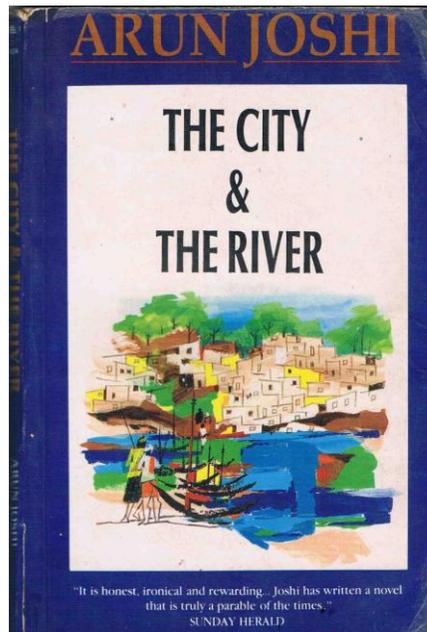
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## Natural and Supernatural Elements in Arun Joshi's *The City and the River*

P. Bala Shanmuga Devi, Ph.D.



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## **Arun Joshi's Cultural and Literary Ethos**

Arun Joshi's creations are enhanced by the three-fold faculty of a poet's expansiveness, minuteness of a scientist and the vision of a spiritual sage. Under the British rule Indians were exposed to Western culture, and of course to the potent English language which has become the most suitable backdrop for Joshi's creative frame of mind.

As befitting his period of dual culture exposure on most of the affluent, foreign educated elite, Joshi's heroes are all equipped with shrewd discerning intelligence, as sharp as the first intellectual hero depicted in Virgil's *Aeneid* and like the best intellectual hero of Indian Vedic literature *Nachiketa* who vied with *Yama* to learn about life. Through these characters Joshi deals with lofty themes springing from his moralistic inner soul, by plotting around them anecdotes that relate to the socio-cultural background. Simultaneously, he draws in huge Indian cities like Bombay and New Delhi, highly developed Western cities like New York and Boston, and the neglected primitive untrodden forest of Maikala hills in central India as well the Harlem of America.

### ***The City and the River and the Mystery Around***

*The City and the River* was the last novel of Joshi, published nine years after his previous Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *The Last Labyrinth*. *The City and the River* is a parable of times, set in a wider backdrop, using an artistically satisfying mixture of prophecy and fantasy. The strong undertone in favor of environmentalism make this novel sound more as a political novel, couched in metaphors, etc.

Unlike Joshi's other four novels where the narration is to see the world through the eyes of the protagonist, this story is narrated by an omniscient narrator, a sage named Great Yogeswara, who is both within and without the narrative. This political fable also falls into a

New literary genre called apocalypse, from the Greek Apo-calyptein, meaning to 'un-veil'...in the form of a revelation of the end of history. Violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpse of a world between good and evil... Apocalypticism has been described as a genre born out of crisis, designed to stiffen the resolve of an embattled community by dangling in front of it the vision of a sudden and permanent release from his captivity. It is underground literature, the consolation of the persecuted. (Garrard 86)

The narrator recites to his Name-less disciple the events that took place in the city at a particular point of history. At the end of the recital, he commissions his disciple, the nameless child of the boatman to move forward to another historical point. The novel ends where it begins.

Relentless cycle of birth and rebirth is highlighted and man's endeavour to overcome this cycle of endless repetition of birth is dealt with. "On the ruins of that city, as always

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happens, a new city has risen. It is ruled by another Grand Master” (*City and River* 262). The city in question is governed by benevolent but greedy Grand Masters who are bent on lording over its citizens.

### **Grand Dreams – Allegorical Mode**

The present Grandmaster one day dreams that he becomes a king, sitting on top of the hill surrounded by the waters of a river and by a circle of naked men closely cornering him to the extent of choking him by their close proximity. By this dream, the Grand Master entertains hopes of becoming the king and resorts to unethical ways to realize his dreams.

The use of the allegorical mode, the mythical pattern and the archetypal symbols like the sublime snow-capped mountains, the ever flowing river that sustains mankind physically and spiritually, the sacred fire that purifies, the great deluge or *Pralaya* that wipes out sin and evil to pave the way to a new beginning, gives the book a profound spiritual aura. Besides this, the prophecy giving the whereabouts of the future also has deep mysticism embedded in it.

Who knows, who can read the signs,  
The workings of immortal time?  
A king I see upon a throne,  
In astronomer’s grove the boatmen mourn,  
A thing of darkness growing dark,  
On city walls the shadow’s mark.  
The river, I see, from a teacher rise.  
The hermit, the parrot, the teacher die.  
Under a rain the waters burn,  
To his kingdom at last the king returns.  
- AN OLD PROPHECY (*City and River* 8)

### **The Three Commands**

Three commands are imposed on the citizens – one is to swear allegiance to the Mortal ruler, instead to the divinity, second to enforce compulsive obnoxious and loathsome family planning measures to contain the population of the boatmen and thirdly, the cruel punishment awarded to the dissidents in the name of “Law of Compassionate Righteousness”. These inhuman measures poison the serenity of the country and more cruel laws are promulgated to quell the riots, which are equally preposterous. Just to win the sympathy of the extended community, they go on telling them the crudest and most stupid things. The Astrologer administers a brief oath to the multitude warning them against traitors.

The boatmen, who form the major part of the citizens, say that “If it’s a matter of allegiance, our allegiance is only to the River and to worship the great River, the Time’s

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consort'' (*The City and the River* 9), and the fate of the Government that does not obey Natural justice gets finally devoured by Nature itself:

Rulers reputed for Justice seasoned with mercy  
She bless with boons in plenty  
Others she devours and dances in plenty. (Subramania Bharathiar, *Our Mother*, Bharathi's Poems, 41).

Yet another message which the novel carries is that "By the grace of the river and the mountain, rain is made. By the grace of the mother earth, a crop is grown. What is grown is plentiful for all and many more. But the crop is then pasted with labels of money and the mud-people do not have the money and so they are seen running here and there fighting over trifles... Thus is God's law twisted in the hands of the Seven Hills..." (*The City and the River* 20). The *River* stands as the symbolic representation of the primordial Nature, which should get prior attention above all.

### **The Social Crimes Condemned**

Joshi in *The City and the River* mainly deals with the seriousness of the ill effects arising out of many social crimes. These include indiscriminate mining, compulsory family planning, drastic evacuation of families for the sake of straightening an avenue, failure to accept the poorer citizens at their face value, venturing to destroy the cultural background of one's own subjects, plotting to perpetuate a despotic dynastic rule of a single family, thereby marring the congenial atmosphere and environment all over the land. A cultured society survives when accord prevails over discord, and when peace and co-operation triumphs over perpetual tension and hostility.

Brutal demolition of habitations and encroachments of poor citizens, wrenching the personal rights of Boatmen, press censorship, vandalism, etc., all are part of despotic durbar rule. The re-activated dead gold mines become a death trap, not a source of prosperity for all the Grand Master's political enemies. Later on when the Professor fasts unto death and mass upheaval is feared, the Grand Master makes a strategic retreat and decides to issue a decree wherein "all prisoners shall be told their crimes, or, set free" (*The City and the River* 167-68). The Astrologer is alarmed at the prospect of what "will happen when thousands upon thousands of the vanished ones come back and flood the city streets." (*The City and the River* 168), but the Grand Master replies that "Issuing of a decree, Astrologer, does not mean its immediate implementation. It will no doubt take time ..." (*The City and the River* 168) and drives home the fact that he has no real intention of enacting the decree.

However, as expected, the public, even his non-supporters fail to see through his falsehood. They believe his misleading words. The Grand Master loathes the boat men and considers them a disgrace to the city, moving around half-clad and is bent upon curtailing their freedom by means of law. "Let there be only one child to a mother or two

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to a home. Let the boatmen not exceed this limit until their numbers are checked.” (*The City and the River* 16-17) he states to the Astrologer who is aghast at the prospect and meekly retorts that it is “something of which there is no mention in our sacred books.” (*The City and the River* 17). This finally leads to a great upheaval and the resultant deluge. They are people who worship “the great river which was Time’s consort and Time itself.” (*The City and the River* 61) and hence the deluge is self-explanatory.

The Grand Master claims to act according to the prophecy which speaks of the arrival of a king. The false fabricated propaganda against Master Bhoma, the Professor, and the boatmen of the boat race, merits due condemnation. “Cursed be the Social lies that warp us from the living Truth/Cursed be the sickly forms that err from Honest Nature rule,” writes Tennyson.

### **A Calm Respite for the Author**

In spite of all his vitriolic criticism of the defacement of earth, abusing water resource, denigrating one’s own brethren, Joshi finds some respite in enjoying the serenity of the Himalayan ranges, and a beautiful rose garden amidst the most inhuman atmosphere in his “city”. India has great obsession for its flower-based culture, both spiritually, aesthetically and therapeutically. The learned *Rishis* of Bharat recognized the healing aspect of the fragrance of flowers and hence devised methods to trap them in *Agarbathies* to heal humanity holistically.

Joshi introduces this profound idea in his Grandfather’s rose garden of *The City and the River*. “Dharma’s grandfather lives on a rose farm. His roses are the finest in city and is said to dance to the sound of music” (*The City and the River* 23), juxtaposed with the barren concrete jungle of the intimidating rulers. Magnanimity of the grandfather, the head of the family, the honest police officer Dharma, the highly intelligent astrologer, the most dutiful father of Dharma expose themselves in the most beautiful garden in the city. A fine picture of a perennial ocean of swaying noble-born roses expands pleasingly before one’s eyes as we read Joshi:

The farm was brightly lit because grand father was putting his roses to sleep. What stunned one was the quality of the roses. Swaying gently in the breeze the roses seemed alive ...like children in dresses of yellow and orange, red and pink. (*The City and the River* 23)

Even the cruel grand master, whose aversion to fine arts has been well known, a rose of good lineage was something that he had never been able to resist, yet shows his self conceit and arrogance by naming a new variety of flower after his name that is uncalled for. However, when a small part of the rose farm succumbs to the insidious sulphurous emission of the gold mines, and proves to be a clear signal for more such mishaps the grandfather hopes feverishly for redemption of the same. He never fears flood from the dear great river, because he believes that as long as the roses stand the mother river who

has given them birth will not hurt them. This stands true, for when the rose garden is shelled and destroyed, the river swells and there rises the resultant deluge. The shells that had destroyed Grandfather's home and ruined his rose garden had also blown away the embankment... The river had filled the crater and covered the wreckage of the farm house. It was now spilling out into the city.... And now the Hermit can hear a new rushing and roaring as yard by yard the angry river takes the embankment by its roots and flings it like a pebble into the churning whirlpools....(*The City and the River* 251-252).

### **The Faith and the Blossom**

This faith of the grandfather stands witness to the fact of the bio-geological aspect, which informs us of a nocturnal energy field present in a particular region, which, if left undisturbed, radiates a force palpable and concrete for sustenance. The living presence of this force nurtures all the eco diversity upon the land. Just as human beings are endowed with a sixth sense, Joshi gives a dramatic description of how the roses go to sleep one by one and can never bear any torment of harshness from the tyrants in the face of which in a minute or two the bushes wither and fall.

The lip service of the grandmaster saying merely that the disease will not spread, taking care also to stress his intention to call the rose in his name clearly is no indication of the ruler's inclination towards restoring normalcy in his kingdom, so that no more such casualties of eco pressure would happen in future.

### **Emancipation of the Soul**

Now and then Joshi in the garb of the professor-cum-astrologer travels through his city accompanied by Little Star who is thousands of years old, basks in the galaxies that swing back and forth in the majestic indigo sky, the nightly canopies, the great city and their great ancient river. The Professor in his twenty years of friendship with the stars claims to have received complete emancipation to his soul. Such is the power of nature that can effortlessly help cure a man of all his yearnings. Hopefully, the modern war-mongering society should not mar this serenity of *Akash* by STAR WARS in the future.

On behalf of these inactive intelligentsia, Joshi, who has traveled far and wide in this land of horror wreaked by inhuman interference that made inroads on the eco-kingdom, begs forgiveness. The *Yajna* of the affected ones, whether they are humans, flora, or fauna, should go on with the fire of enthusiasm of the environmentalists, eco-conscientious public and devotees of Nature till the goal of restoring a healthy, wealthy, fertile earth and sky to our descendants.

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### **Primary Source**

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