

Epistemicide of the Boatmen in ArunJoshi's *The City and the River*

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's novels reflect the rise of postcolonial, neocolonial problems and the lionization of diasporic writing with its radical restructuring of social relations that distinguishes the modern epoch from everything that comes before. Political freedom did not gratify the hungry expectations of the people of postcolonial period in India. Poverty, social injustice, class inequality and communal riots led to painful exodus of the refugees afflicted by spiritual depression, general distrust and pessimism. Joshi's fiction is an excellent articulation of an Indian voice, and an Indian sensibility. This research paper ventures to read *The City and the River*, the final novel of Joshi, as a parable of times, set in a wider backdrop, using an artistically satisfying mixture of prophecy, fantasy and a startlingly ingenious vision of real politics, is a severe commentary on the *Times* embedded with echoes of the Indian Emergency in the Nineteen Seventies. Joshi has come out of the murky and suffocating tunnel of alienation and identity crisis into a glimpse of a new light in this novel. This political fable also falls into a new literary genre called apocalypse wherein he unveils the pain and pathos evolving around the life of the 'Boat men' in their struggle against the ruling greedy Grand Masters who are bent on over-lording its citizens by resorting to all possible atrocities.

Keywords: postcolonial, neocolonial, social injustice, class inequality, alienation, identity crisis
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Arun Joshi is adept in framing his characters with no direct references to any Indian in particular. The corrupt practices and manipulations of Indian bureaucrats are vividly and authentically communicated with perfect ease and conviction in *The City and the River*. Wholeness of vision is sought by going into the cultural and spiritual problems of India, his own country. This vision is established from a political perspective, as R.K. Dhawan rightly states:

The theme of *The City and the River*, unlike Joshi's earlier works, does not have a streak of autobiography; nor is it a story of personal, private lives. The novel is an ample evidence of Joshi's "road not taken," for in his 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. (34)

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The city in question is governed by benevolent but greedy Grand Masters who are bent on over-lording its citizens. The present Grand Master one daydreams 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 undue means to realize his dreams. To add to it, a prophecy is made known in *The City and the River* which runs thus:

Who knows, who can read the signs,
The workings of immortal time?
A king I see upon a throne,
In astronomer's grove the boatmen mourn,
A thing of darkness growing dark,
On city walls the shadow's mark.
The river, I see, from a teacher rise.
The hermit, the parrot, the teacher die.
Under a rain the waters burn,
To his kingdom at last the king returns. (216)

This gives immense hope for the Grand Master who with the aid of the Astrologer interprets it to his benefit. He plans ways and means to usurp complete power for him which would then be passed to his son. "To the modern reader," says Garrard, "millennial and apocalyptic beliefs may seem bizarre, but even the most lurid anticipations of the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy are based upon interpretations that possess their own argumentative logic" (86). The Astrologer and the Hermit had argued over the meaning of the prophesy earlier. Similarly, multiple interpretations are made leading to strong, vehement opposition in accordance with Derrida's changeability of meanings of words as he puts thus: "the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts" (qtd. in Bertens 125).

The citizens, especially the boatmen, are not ready to have a self proclaimed king. A great upheaval results but he retorts saying that he has tamed men of iron and why then he shall not be able to tame these men of butter. However, the men of butter pose slippery tactics never to be caught by the iron hand such as, by lamenting for their outlawed children unanimously. They make their views public by voicing it into the police commissioner's mike inadvertently, which is heard all over the city through the rulers' satellite network, "Through the commissioner's open Telephone it sped to the satellite circling high above the earth and once again flooded the video

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sets of thousands of enraged people”(48). Further, the boatmen with their unique musical instruments and the songs bring forth a “display of souls” (38) and “They tend to be sentimental at times. They want everyone to see how their souls ache since their children were outlawed. They want the Grand Master to make amends.” (38) But it fails to create any desired effect and further, their instruments alone are burnt to ashes by means of laser weapons fired from a helicopter flying above their heads: “The boatmen had been prepared for bullets, bombs. The destruction of their instruments took them by surprise. Their singing wavered and became hideous to their ears. Their spirits broke and they fell silent” (49). However, this is just a temporary success for the Grand Master.

Bhumiputhra referred to as Bhoma, the mathematics teacher, to drive his point opposing the ruling ecclesia to the ignorant public, resorts to speak as the common people do, and think as wise men do. The Lottery Stall, which the government had installed to loot its citizens, without the poor folk being aware of it, is later used as a venue to enlighten the mass by means of a simple folk tale. The very fact that a government runs a lottery stall explains multiple hazards. Samuel Johnson in his “Lure of Lottery” says that the grief caused by such lotteries is proportional to the hope it nurtures. He stresses upon the concept that rational and manly industry is worthy enough and the mere gift of luck is below one’s dignity. The Professor initiates a tactic and uses those stalls wherein he tries to drive home the grave fact that the Grand Master is exploiting the common folk. This attempt turns out to be less effective in convincing the mob of the Grand Master’s wily plan and Shailaja’s brother an ardent student of Bhoma ventures to make it more appropriate by offering Grandfather’s prized roses to those who listen to Bhoma’s parable and wait for a lucky draw. Bhoma’s innovative yet simple parable of a Naked King, otherwise known as “The Emperor’s New Clothes” evokes much response from the common folks easily, to fight against serfdom, appraised wholly of the vicious intentions of the ruler. Once upon a time a king was very fond of new clothes and was in love with himself that all his time went into the designing of new clothes. His subjects were slaves of his looks and did anything he asked. As time passed, however, the king ran out of ideas for new clothes. In panic, he sent for the court Astrologer. The Astrologer pretends to weave the finest dress ever made, for the king having stated that it would be invisible to people who were stupid and were not loyal. The king pays a visit one day to the Astrologer and finds that he is up to some trick. The Astrologer consents with the King and says that instilling fear in the minds of the subjects is the purpose of the fake dress. The great day arrives when the King pretends to wear the dress, remaining stark naked. The subjects in mortal fear of being termed disloyal and stupid are in full praise of the king’s robe until a child blurts out that the King is naked:

‘Nobody ever had clothes as beautiful as our king,’ they cried. ‘How fine he looks.’ “Then suddenly a child’s voice was heard. ‘But the king is naked’, cried

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the child ... And soon everyone was chanting, 'The king is naked. The king is naked.' ... The king gave the necessary orders and some chanters including the child and his father were beheaded. The others were sent to prison. (126-127)

The narration in the Lottery stall is cleverly coined and on par with that of the funeral oration of Mark Antony never once degrading those in power but seemingly putting down Julius Caesar as being over ambitious to fill the country's coffers, not his own. The Naked King parable also has a feigned closure that the king though naked should not be criticized and is beyond such criticism. "That, ladies and gentlemen ... is the story that this notorious Master Bhoma used to preach before he was arrested" (127) he would finally say and then they would have the draw. The fable of the 'naked king' mentioned in the novel seems to be similar to that of a naked king in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Probably Shakespeare's *naked king* might have been the kindred of Joshi's 'naked king'. "And he but naked, though locked up in steel / whose conscience with injustice is corrupted", or rather similar to Othello who states, "Look in upon me then and speak with me / Or Naked as I am I will assault thee." (Oth. 5.2. 257-60)

Freedom when denied by those in power instigates a sense of rebellion in civilians. The Grand Master has no cause to interfere with the peaceful life in his city of Seven Hills. His eagerness and greed to be always in the limelight makes him decide to declare an 'Era of Ultimate Greatness' and 'Way of Three Beatitudes'. This, he does without consulting the members of the council which he has cunningly formulated in order to project a deceptive picture of running a democratic government:

The Grand Master likes his people but, at times, he is not certain. Ever so often, it seems to him, the people lose faith in him, become unreasonable, turn mutinous. At such times the Astrologer and he confer—for days and nights on end—and put together new formulas that might win back their allegiance ... Until finally, in the year of this chronicle, soon after he dreamt his dream, 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)

Hence, they formulate plans with neither consultation nor concern for anyone else. Nevertheless,

who decides what law is to be made? Who has a seat at the table? Whose voice determines the content of law? ... the process of preparing legislation is today an opaque process that takes place behind closed doors in the fortress that Parliament has become. The public have little knowledge and no voice about the Bills that are under consideration. (Gopal 15)

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No wonder that the public is not aware of what takes place behind the scenes but even the higher officials being unaware is quite awesome and unheard of in a republic. Even this takes place in the city and the Three Beatitudes is drawn without the knowledge of his Advisory council barring the Astrologer. Inadvertently, the common man was in the dark. Then also,

The silence of political leaders and media could not apprise common man that what horrors this emergency has brought onto the country and its traditions. The common man was not aware of the press censorship, persecution of political opponents, denial of the right to life, suspension of fundamental rights, subversion of the Constitution, stifling of the judiciary, indiscriminate detention and torture, forced sterilizations, suppression of dissent, terrorization by the government agents. (Rahman www.milligazette.com)

Paul Valery rightly says that, “Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them.” (Sharma 107) The first of the Three Beatitudes is to swear allegiance to the Mortal ruler, instead of, 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 riot, which are equally preposterous. Just to win the sympathy of the broad mass they go on telling them the crudest and most stupid things. The Astrologer administers a brief oath to the multitude warning them against traitors: “In life and 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” (100).

But the Great River decides to wipe them all en masse barring one child. The innocent mathematics teacher Bhoma, beloved student of the equally magnanimous astronomy Professor is named a terrible assassin and conspirator equipped with sophisticated weapons and clandestine satellite network. The malicious intentions of the Grand Master prompt him to do so, with the aid of the Astrologer and the sycophant Police Commissioner.

The ignominious order of the police commissioner at the instigation of the grandmaster for the night arrest of the entire boatmen who refuse to take oath of allegiance to the ruler and sending them to the ever-darkened dungeons with no trial of any sort incubates the havoc which follows soon.. Even the treacherous Astrologer trembles at the audacity of the utterance of the Grand Master proclaiming himself to be “the lord and master of these Seven Hills.”(219) no less than a god. “What is God? Where is He? Does He even exist? He must surely have other things

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to worry about than intervene in the affairs of this city where we in any case rule.”(219) he adds. Guns and mortal weapons made by the poor, hardworking, honest labourers of the mud house and the boatmen are used against the very same people. Drunk with the ultimate Aphrodisiac named ‘Complete Power’, the Grand Master inflicts untold injustice to the boatmen and their champions Bhoma, the Professor, head boatmen, the serene Grandfather, Vasu, the brave righteous journalist, Shailaja, dutiful Dharma and their honest family. No justification could be rendered to wipe a whole community just because they oppose the atrocious Three Beatitudes proposed by the Grand Master. Despotic governance leads to a point which is beyond redemption and hence the resultant deluge and total inundation.

The superpowers of the world, at all ages, have looked upon India as a pioneer society that values Truth, a weapon that guns and bars could not deter. No less a political stalwart as Churchill himself has claimed to have lost the battle against truth. However, the Grand Master relies on backroom political manipulations and merely resorts to kill bumblebees under giant wheels. He proves to be a wily political leader who places the nation at his service and not the vice-versa. Epistemicide of the Boatmen in ArunJoshi’s *The City and the River* is complete and redemption is not possible as there is no way to bring the dead alive.

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