

Discovering the Theme of Politics in the Fictional World of Arun Joshi's *The City and The River*

Dr. Krishna Kant Singh

Professor of English

P. G. Dept. of English

Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara

Abstract:

*As the dictionary explains politics is the science or art of government, political views, its which has concern with not only government machinery rather the more attention paid on public affairs and welfare living in a particular territory. After the independence of India several tumults and turmoil have occurred which have harassed the public welfare and the country is terribly influenced by it. The political conditions of the country have been expressed by a series of novelists who have expressed their views in for and against of the then government. The novels of Arun Joshi present the real phenomenon of Indian politics observed in the everyday life of Indian people. In India, people are habituated to put themselves in the context of political scenario for many reasons altogether. This paper aims to study the ironical display of human behaviour of an individual in imposed political atmosphere as we find in his novel *The City and The River*.*

Key Words: Political Scenario, Real Phenomenon, Political Atmosphere, Human Behaviour, Public Affairs.

During the British rule and even after independence the sensitive novelists have been trying to have expressed their observations on the Indian politics in particular and on politics of any country has great concern with the lives of the people. Chaman Nahal's 'Azadi' and 'The Crown and the Loin Cloth' are two very important political novels which deal with the political condition of India during the British rule. 'Azadi' presents the life – like description of the condition of the country during the partition violence. Nayantara Sahgal is champion among the novelists dealing with political situations of the country. 'A Situation in New Delhi' primarily deals with the political condition of India after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru. Kushwant Singh, one of the champion among the partition novelists, has brilliantly portrayed the partition upheavals in both the countries India and Pakistan in his notable novel mainly deals with the frenzied waves in which millions of people were massacred, yet it also portrays the conditioning of the so called politicians. The Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa too has projected a life like picture of the partition frenzies and its impact in her famous novel 'Ice Candy Man'. She also has pointed out the similar greedy and treacherous designs of the politicians of both the countries India and Pakistan. We notice how Shashi Tharoor too, in his famous political novel 'The Great Indian Novel' has tried his best to portray the reality of political games and politics of India during the period of post and pre emergency. The leaders of the country are epitomized with the leaders, politicians and characters of the period of 'The Mahabharat'. Tharoor also points out the fact that the game of

Received: 22 August 2023

Revised: 1 September 2023

Final Accepted 7 September 2023

Copyright © authors 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8323443>

politics has always remained dirty and biased. Hence Tharoor's observations of the politics and political activities have universal appeal in the realm of politics.

We notice how standing in contrast with the other political novelists of India, Arun Joshi has depicted brilliantly the universal concept of politics in his famous novel 'The City and The River.' The novel is a master – piece dealing with the cosmic realities which occurs in a cycle. We find that 'The City and The River' presents the symbolic meaning knitted in an allegorical design. It presents the two sets of human life of the world – one ruler's class and other the ruled class. The ruler class is always privileged of all means of comforts and the ruled class is cursed to suffer terribly. The city represents the ruler class and the river represents the ruled class on whose toil and efforts the ruler class leads luxurious life and the ruled class are treated not above animal species.

As the story of the novel begins the city is governed by the Grand Master who deals with the administrative affairs of the city after seeking the advice of a council of advisers. There runs a river near the city governed by the Grand Master. The people dwelling in small huts near the river are mainly boats men who are the real beneficiaries of the river. And in the city there live superior people who have no concern with the affair of the state. All the rules framed by the Grand Master are executed on the hut dwellers or the boatmen. They are bound to suffer under the subjugated and unwanted rules proclaimed by the Grand Master. The Grand Master creates a reign of terror to torture the boatmen who are headed by a woman. The Grand Master, his son and the advisers do not hesitate in torturing the boatmen to an unimaginable extent. The head of the boatmen is made blind by the men of the Grand Master. The boatmen turn into rebellion and there occurs a great holocaust in which huge property and lives are destroyed. Even the Rose Garden of the Grand Master meets its complete ruin. And finally Nature also plays a devastating role. The river rises to the extent that it sweeps away all the lives of the city and all houses are dilapidated. After the flood subsides there remains only one man who is called Nameless – one who is an illegal child. He is sent to the city to re-establish it.

We find that the narrative of the novel begins with Prologue and ends with epilogue and in the middle of the body there are nine chapters. These chapters narrate the rule of the Grand Master, his becoming king, the impact of the reign of terror, rebellion of the citizens, the declaration of the age of ultimate greatness, the repressive measures adopted by the king and ultimately complete ruin of the city in a great and devastating flood. We notice how the novelist makes this story told by a great Guru named Yogeshwar Rao. Yogeshwar Rao is a great seer and expert in knowing the past, the present and the future. He has been regarded as ageless person who had been teaching the characters of the story. Now he proposes to tell the story of the ruined city which existed in the past. The Great Guru Yogeshwar Rao has chosen a disciple who is nameless – one, reared by the Guru since his infancy. The Prologue is the setting of the background of the story to be told by the Guru. The Guru gives his disciple Nameless – one an elixir to drink which opens a new horizon before the disciple. The disciple becomes competent to listen the music which

is being played in the space between the planets. Then the Guru tells his nameless disciple that there are two kinds of thoughts – one related to body and the other to the spirit.

While telling the story of ‘The City and The River’ to his disciple Nameless – one, Yogeshwar Rai says that riparian city is governed by the Great Master. The city is divided into three distinct parts according to the social status of the people:

“The social stratification of the city is signified by the attitude at which the different classes live. The Grand Master, the ministers who also act as his councillors whose social superiority is matched by the geographical height, live and administer the city from the seven Hills (which are the highest in the city) varying in height according to the status of the ministers, with the Grand Master living on the highest hill. The middle class people live on a comparatively lower ground in pink brick buildings. The lowly people, including the boatmen, inhabit the area along the river bank which is the lowest in attitude. The level of authenticity varies in inverse proportion to the social position of the different categories of inhabitants.” [1]

We notice how the habitations of the people of these three categories are fixed at the levels of altitude which remarkably mark the hollowness of the so-called administrative class and the head of the nation. The novelist seems to pass the comments and satirical remarks upon the motto of autocracy. Boatmen symbolically stand for the working class on whose toil or efforts people of so called upper and highest class live. And the working class is neglected or cursed to live the lives of animals. It is not only in a particular age or particular country rather it has happened in all the ages and in every region of the world. The novelist draws the attention of the mass pointing out such diversities among the similar species. It is a black spot on the face of larger humanity. The Grand Master is not only one ruler rather he is the epitome of the ruler class and the boatmen are not only the boatmen on the bank of a particular river rather they are the every working man of the world or the all working men of the world including farmers, farm workers and the factory workers who lead pitiable and miserable life even after sweating hard.

The Grand Master’s ancestors have been living in the place for seventy years. And they had sympathy for the people of their city but they maintained distinction and disparity in it. They expressed their sense of sympathy to the rich only and the poor became the object of hate and dislike due to their poverty and miserable living standards. In this way it is quite clear that the poor particularly the boatmen were tortured in both the ways – due to their poverty and the lack of proper wages for their toil. Such tyranny was in practice in the rule of the Grand Masters. It shows the political motto of the ruling class which has been witnessed since time immemorial. In this way the political principles of the ruling class has been exposed by the novelist in ‘The City and The River.’

We notice how another very humiliating motto has been adopted by The Grand Master towards the boatmen that they are not known by their names. They have no name outside their community. They are addressed as:

“The Nameless one because outside their home habitations no one knows their name.”

[2]

In process of telling the story to his nameless disciple, the great Yogeshwar Rao says that the Great Master had constituted a council of the friends of the people on the advisory council which included five members in that. Among the members was the palace Astrologer, the minister for trade, the education adviser, the police commissioner and the master of rallies. The Palace Astrologer and the master of rallies, were unusual persons in the administrative affairs. Being dissatisfied with the wrong intention and biased behaviour of the Grand Master, the boatmen slowly but silently turn rebellious to the administrators and the Grand Master. It creates deep rooted fear in Grand Master and he calls the meeting of the advisory council to suppress the rebellions. After getting psychologically perplexed the Grand Master sees a dream at night. The dream shows him as the king of the city and around his throne the river flows higher and higher and the gods play one string which is the musical instrument of the boatmen. The Grand Master further sees that the naked men appear and the number of the naked men goes on increasing near his throne. And even after his warning they do not leave the throne. The Grand Master wakes and becomes puzzled.

The Grand Master explains about the dream before the Astrologer who analyses the dream and says that the dream confirms the earlier prophecy which declares the Grand Master as the future king of the city. The earlier prophecy tells as such:

“Who knows, who can read the signs,
The working of immoral 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 shadows mark,
The River, I see, from a teacher rise,
The hermit, the parrot, the teacher die,
Under a rain the water burn,
To his kingdom at last the king returns.” [3]

We notice the Astrologer analyses the dream in favour of the Grand Master’s desire to become the king of the city. The prophecy made earlier becomes the misdirected desires. They both become adamant to take suppressive steps to get the allegiance of the boatmen in making the Grand Master, the king of the city. The Astrologer issues a decree known as the Triple way which binds the citizens to offer their allegiance to the Grand Master, the second part of the decree orders to have only one child in a family and the last one orders that the violation of decree would be the cause of severe punishment. The Headman of the boatmen who is woman quickly understands the intention of the Grand Master which is to suppress the free will of the common people or the working class. The Headman flatly refuses the order of the Grand Master and says that they offer

their allegiance only to the river and non else. And secondly she tells that the concept of family planning is useless because the national produce is sufficient to feed the children. And the reason behind the poverty of the hutmen and boatmen is that the brick people purchase the national produce on low rate and sell it during the period of scarcity. The brick people are responsible for economic hardship in the city and the exploit the working class. After Headmen's refusal of the three decrees the Astrologer announces another decree known as 'The Era of Ultimate Greatness' which enjoins the people to beware of the enemy within and enemy without and reminds also of the 'Three Beautitudes which the Headman has discarded as nonsense. After the refusal of the Headman to follow the decrees of the Grand Master, the government issues warrant to arrest the rebellions and to send them to goldmines which is the jail.

Dharma is a police officer who is assigned to arrest the rebellions of the boatmen. But Dharma has sympathy with the boatmen and their leader, Bhumiputra. When Dharma knows that Bhumiputra has absconded, he arrests an old man name Patanjali who is of ninety years old. Bhumiputra is known as Bhoma also and he is the teacher of Mathematics. Bhoma had been student of Professor who is an astronomer and he always remains busy in watching galaxies. Since the Professor always remains busy in watching galaxies, he is unaware of the decrees passed by the Astrologer and 'The Era of the Ultimate Greatness.' The Professor is informed by a little boy that Bhoma is missing and he must search him. The Professor, finding the boy very intelligent calls him as little star. And the boy warns the Professor for not going to the Grand Master to ask where about of Bhoma. It is reported that Bhoma was arrested but an armed group of people snatched Bhoma from the custody of the police. Bhoma was rescued by the men of the education advisor. Hence it is quite apparent that the education advisor too is in favour of the boatmen and their supporters.

We find that the tyranny of the Grand Master increases day by day and in the meantime, the Astrologer's announcement of that Grand Master's son would be the heir of the throne, creates fear in councillors. The Minister for trade becomes more anxious and embarrassed to know the fact. The education advisor has arranged a shock – brigade which mentally helps the boatmen. In this way there occurs split among the councillors at the levels of low caste and high caste. The Grand Master fails to understand the burning issues and the sense of revolt against his tyranny. And even in the critical condition he declares himself as king and his son, the heir. Consequently the anger of the down trodden and common people and the differences among his supporters and councillors creates bloodshed and the city gets destroyed. After that the river swells so high that no one remains alive in that great flood except Yogeshwar Rao and his disciple nameless – one.

We find that Yogeshwar Rai has already told his disciple about his identity how he was nourished by the Great Guru in his own care. The Nameless – one can be equated with Jesus Christ also, because he too was found and adopted. The Great Guru makes his disciple aware of all kinds of evils which frequently prevail in human society. Greed, lust, avarice, hatred, and rivalry

the feelings of high and low etc, which cause differences among people and they are bereaved by leading a happy and prosperous life.

We notice how dealing with the characters of the politicians in ‘The City and The River,’ Yogeshwar Rai seems to say that the cunning politicians serve their own interests even by making fool of the power holders. The Grand Master is a fool who is misguided by the Astrologer at every step. The Astrologer misinterprets the dream of the Grand Master and he insinuates him in direction of declaring himself as the king of the city. Though The Grand Master holds the position of a king, yet the Astrologer misguide him (The Grand Master) to invite a new trouble of protest by the hutmen and the boatmen.

It is quite apparent that the motto of the politicians of all ages has remained to divide the people among, various castes. And they preferably give priority to certain caste of people only in order to create differences and envy among the people at the caste level so that they may remain united. And the greedy politicians can run their administrations smoothly. There is deep – rooted caste discrepancies in ‘The City and The River’ also. The Grand Master wears the sacred thread which indicates his belonging to upper class. And it is proposed that a person of the upper caste may be the king of the city and non from the low caste such as the mud men or the boatmen. The Education Advisor Brahmin by caste looks down upon the other officers who come from the low caste. Since the Police Commissioner belongs to low caste, he is frequently looked down by the Education Advisor. Along with the caste – feeling the city suffers from all kinds of corruption such as high price rise during the period of festival and so on which the famous critic Shankar Kumar observes:

“Varieties of political malpractices have been mentioned in the novel. These include the official control over the media, the suppression of dissent, black marketing and profiteering, raising of the prices of essential commodities during festivals and even smuggling in which the Grand Trader operates with the connivance of the minister for trade, a cousin of the Grand Master.” [4]

We notice how through the parable of the unknown city, Arun Joshi seems to point every city and every country now existing on this planet. It is common place experience that the majority of people suffer due to black – marketing and the traders swell their treasure and become richer and richer. The traders commit malpractices by taking government officials in their favour for which those officers are paid handsome amounts. At present Indian people too have been the victims of acute corruption which is necessarily the product of politics.

We find that the power seeker politicians use all means to remain in good faith of the supreme authority. They reach at the height of flattery to please the highest authority. So does the Astrologer in ‘The City and The River’ to get the favour of the Grand Master. In his speech he says:

“The Grand Master must immediately request his son to maintain Dharma Rajya that he has established... It has for a hundred years sacrificed its men, its women, its children, its wealth and its very all for the sake of this city.” [5]

The ironical speech of the Astrologer makes the Grand Master and his son swell to a great extent. In content and spirit it echoes that of John Dryden’s speech of Flecknoe in his famous satire ‘Mac Flecknoe.’ The novelist points out towards the greedy politicians of the age that they never care for the welfare of the people or the nation rather for their own interest they keep the nation at stake.

We find that in order to get the allegiance of the people the autocrat Grand Master has adopted the cruellest steps. The officers and the military forces are given liberty to crush the rebellious people at any cost. The atrocities of the police and military mounts to the extent that Master Bhoma and Dharma both, the ex – police officers who are living in boatmen’s loin – cloth, are butchered mercilessly in the Rose Garden. The Grand Master instead of protecting and providing the food and shelter to the poor people, purchase more and more guns to shoot the innocent citizens. It is the official report of the Police Commissioner which he tells to Professor: “This might sound absurd but the fact is that the poorer the city is, the more guns its government needs.” [6]

We notice how the novelist has raised a fundamental issue regarding the governance. The world needs class war for the equal status of humanity. But most of the politicians of the world in general and the Indian politicians in particular try to prevent class war. If class war occurs the luxurious and untamed lives of the politicians would be endangered. So the cunning and greedy politicians prefer or it may be said that they cause caste war. If caste war occurs frequently, the politicians sitting in power would remain safe. The similar thing occur in ‘The City and The River.’ The mud – people and the boatmen are larger in number and they are the real workers and their hard labour provides food and shelter to the brick people and the administrative class. But in spite of their hard labour they bereaved of living happy life. The brick dwellers who are mostly traders live on the efforts of the working class. So by making the boatmen and the hutmen raise their voices against the tyranny of the Grand Master, the novelist present the new vision of life. And perhaps it is necessary in Indian Republic.

It is worthwhile to have a glance over the political theories or on politics. As the great political thinkers like Aristotle and Kautilya of India have discussed in detail and they have provided some principles on it. They have imagined of the ideal sovereign state where they have given emphasis on the security of the nation and more on the public welfare. If the citizens of a country are happy and peaceful, the nation remains static. For the peaceful handling of a nation the politicians or rulers must be sincere and honest. Contrary to the principles of politics the politicians of the present age have adopted wrong means to remain in power and to serve their own interests. It is not of only one country rather in almost all this countries of the world politicians have been important.

In 'The City and The River,' Arun Joshi has tried his best to satirize and expose the cunningness, envy, wrath and dishonestly of the politicians. The Nameless city, nameless river and the nameless characters identify almost all the countries, all the rivers and all the politicians.

We find that 'The City and The River' presents not only the political games rather it presents the motto of the natural justice. If politicians fail to establish social justice, the Nature plays a vital role for maintaining natural justice. And the other very important point has been raised by the novelist which is the cosmic law of creation and destruction. That which has been created is bound to be destroyed in either ways.

We find that the caste factor has been spread in society like epidemic which works like cancerous diseases. All the major officers are divided into caste politics and they suffer either from superiority complex or from inferiority complex. The Education Advisor belongs to high – caste and the Police Commissioner belongs to low caste that is of the boatmen. So the humiliating behaviour of the Education Advisor irritates the Commissioner which he admits before the Professor:

“The way this high and low business is tearing this city apart, Professor, is truly sad. Sand and in any case unfair.” [7]

It is such feeling of faithlessness that creates havoc in the society of 'The City and The River.' And the society breaks into the whirl – wind of disbelief, hatred anger and agony that it meets its total annihilation. Though the story of the novel is imaginary, yet the meaning it conveys is really worth - keeping. The novelist seems to warn the Indian politicians and the people to beware of such spreading epidemic of casteism if it is not prevented shortly the Indian Republic too may collapse. Arun Joshi has presented artistically the future image of collapse of the country through his novel of fantasy.

It is equally important to discuss and analyse the novel at the levels of art and craft. The novel is a fantasy so it lacks the characterization. Almost all the characters are flat characters. They do not grow mentally, psychologically and intellectually. Their works are projected, not their personalities. Standing in contrast to 'The City and The River,' 'The Foreigner' or any other novels of Joshi have their characters in growing process. As for example Sindi Oberoi appears in the beginning of the novel as a rootless and dejected man. But after passing his time among variety of people like June, Babu Khemka, Mr. Khemka, Sheila and many others, there occurs a tremendous change in his outlook, thinking behaviour and psychological awareness. There is no such change located in the characters of 'The City and The River.'

We notice how by adopting the mode of parable and fantasy, Arun Joshi has mercilessly satirized the hollowness of the present day politicians. He does not think it appropriate to provide them name and character so they are known by their designation of the post they hold. Since the politicians of today have no character of their own so they are projected nameless. We further find that 'The City and The River' basically gives emphasis over the future consequences of the nation if the politicians do not change their patterns of politics.

References:

1. Joshi Arun, *The City and The River*, p. 267
2. Ibid, - p. 13
3. Ibid, - p. 216
4. Kumar Shankar, *The Novels of Arun Joshi: A Critical Study*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, p. 144
5. Joshi Arun, *The City and The River*, p. 101
6. Ibid, - p. 82
7. Ibid, - p. 81