



TYRANNY AND MORAL RENEWAL IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE CITY AND THE RIVER* : A STUDY

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Abstract This research paper explores Arun Joshi's *The City and the River* as a compelling political allegory that blends myth, parable, and philosophy to critique authoritarian power structures. Set against the backdrop of India's Emergency period (1974–75), the novel goes beyond its immediate historical setting to address universal themes of power, freedom, resistance, and moral responsibility. Through symbolic characters and a mythic narrative structure, Joshi reveals the workings of tyranny, the role of institutional complicity, and the ethical challenges faced by individuals under oppressive regimes. The paper examines the novel's political satire, the symbolism of the city and river, archetypal figures, and philosophical elements influenced by Indian thought and existentialism. It contends that although the novel depicts widespread destruction, it ultimately expresses hope for moral renewal and cyclical regeneration. By using parable as a literary form, Joshi not only critiques a specific political era but also provides a timeless meditation on human society and its ongoing struggles for justice and authenticity.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, political allegory, Indian Emergency, myth and parable, power and resistance

Introduction

Arun Joshi occupies a distinctive position in Indian English fiction for his sustained engagement with the moral and existential crises of modern life. While his earlier novels foreground individual alienation and spiritual quest, *The City and the River* marks a decisive shift towards socio-political concerns. The novel employs the form of a parable to present a sharp satire on authoritarian governance, corruption, and the erosion of democratic values. Though deeply rooted in the Indian Emergency of 1974–75, the narrative deliberately avoids specific names or locations, thereby transforming a historical event into a universal political myth. This research paper seeks to explore how Joshi uses allegory, symbolism, and mythic structure to critique political tyranny while simultaneously affirming the possibility of ethical regeneration.

Political Allegory and the Emergency Context

Arun Joshi's *The City and the River* is widely recognized as a political allegory reflecting the socio-political climate of the Indian Emergency (1975–77) (Joshi 45) ., a time characterized by the suspension of civil liberties, press censorship, forced sterilization campaigns, and arbitrary detentions. Joshi conveys these realities through an allegorical narrative centered on the rule of the Grand Master, whose absolute power symbolizes the concentration of authority during the Emergency. The proclamation of the "Era of Ultimate Greatness" echoes government slogans and initiatives that purported to advance national welfare while effectively stifling opposition.

Joshi's allegory extends beyond surface-level parallels. The mechanisms of power—propaganda, surveillance, coercion, and manipulation of law—are presented as recurring features of authoritarian regimes across time and space. By avoiding direct historical references, the novelist universalizes the experience of political repression, suggesting that tyranny is not confined to a particular nation or era but is a recurring threat wherever power remains unaccountable.

Symbolism of the City and the River

The symbolic contrast between the city and the river forms the structural core of the novel. The city signifies hierarchy, ambition, and institutional rigidity, while the river represents moral continuity and natural justice (Naik, 2004). Central to the novel's allegorical design is the symbolic opposition between the city and the river. The city represents political power, material ambition, and hierarchical control. Its rigid structure, divided into hills and colonies, reflects social stratification and institutional dominance. In contrast, the river symbolizes life, continuity, freedom, and spiritual authenticity. It flows beyond human control, embodying natural order and moral truth.

The boatmen, as children of the river, live in harmony with its rhythms and resist submission to artificial authority. Their allegiance to the river rather than the Grand Master signifies a rejection of imposed power in favour of organic, ethical existence. The final flood, which obliterates the city while the river continues to flow, reinforces the idea that nature and moral truth ultimately outlast political arrogance. As Naik (2004) observes, Joshi transforms historical crisis into symbolic narrative to universalize political experience.

Archetypal Characters and Power Structures

Joshi's characters function primarily as archetypes rather than psychologically complex individuals. The figure of the Grand Master represents centralized authoritarian power. His declaration of the 'Era of Ultimate Greatness' mirrors political rhetoric associated with developmental authoritarianism (Mehrotra, 2003). The Grand Master embodies the authoritarian ruler driven by insecurity, ambition, and fear of dissent. His obsession with consolidating power and ensuring dynastic succession reflects the political impulse to convert authority into hereditary privilege. Surrounding him is a council of advisers—the Astrologer, the Commissioner of Police, the Education Advisor, and the Master of Rallies—who collectively represent the institutional machinery that sustains tyranny.

The Astrologer plays a particularly significant role as the ideological architect of oppression. By manipulating religious rituals and symbolic language, he legitimizes political authority and disguises coercion as divine will. His actions highlight the dangerous alliance between power and pseudo-spiritual rhetoric.

In contrast, the Professor represents moral awakening and intellectual conscience. Initially detached from political realities, he gradually recognizes his complicity through silence and passivity. His eventual sacrifice underscores Joshi's belief that ethical responsibility demands action, even at personal cost.

The Boatmen and Collective Resistance

The boatmen symbolize collective resistance rooted in tradition, dignity, and spiritual autonomy. Though economically marginalized, they possess moral strength derived from their connection to the river. Their refusal to accept the Grand Master's authority challenges the legitimacy of imposed power and exposes the fragility of authoritarian control.

Joshi presents resistance as both heroic and tragic. While the boatmen's rebellion affirms moral courage, it also leads to immense suffering and destruction. This duality reflects the complexity of political struggle, where resistance is necessary but rarely free from cost. The novel does not romanticize revolution; instead, it portrays resistance as an ethical imperative rather than a guaranteed path to victory.

Myth, Parable, and Philosophical Dimensions

The narrative frame of *The City and the River* is explicitly mythic. The story is narrated by the Great Yogeshwara to his disciple, the Nameless One, situating the political narrative within a cosmic cycle of creation, destruction, and renewal. This mythic structure aligns the novel with Indian philosophical traditions, particularly the concepts of karma, dharma, and cyclical time.

Joshi also incorporates existentialist ideas, especially the emphasis on authentic existence and moral choice. Characters such as the boatmen and the Professor embody authenticity by confronting danger and refusing to surrender their ethical convictions. In contrast, the ruling elite exemplify “bad faith” through their conscious participation in injustice for personal gain.

Destruction and Renewal

The cataclysmic flood that destroys the city serves as both punishment and purification. When human institutions fail to uphold justice, nature intervenes to restore moral balance. However, Joshi avoids presenting this destruction as a final resolution. The emergence of a new city on the ruins of the old suggests the cyclical nature of human history, where the same forces of power and resistance reappear in different forms.

The survival of a single child reinforces hope for renewal. Through the Great Yogeshwara’s teachings, Joshi emphasizes that moral regeneration depends on sacrifice, humility, and vigilance. The novel thus ends not in despair but in cautious optimism, affirming faith in humanity’s capacity for ethical rebirth.

Conclusion

The City and the River stands as a compelling political parable that combines historical critique with philosophical depth. By transforming the Indian Emergency into a universal allegory, Arun Joshi exposes the recurring patterns of authoritarianism and the moral challenges faced by individuals and societies under oppressive rule. The novel’s fusion of myth, satire, and existential inquiry enables it to transcend its immediate context and speak to enduring human concerns. As Mehrotra (2003) notes, Joshi avoids romantic revolution, presenting resistance as moral necessity rather than guaranteed victory.

Ultimately, Joshi’s vision is both cautionary and affirmative. While power repeatedly corrupts and cities rise and fall, the river of life continues to flow, carrying within it the possibility of renewal. The novel urges readers to remain ethically alert, to resist injustice, and to recognize that true greatness lies not in domination but in moral responsibility and sacrifice.

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