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EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT IN ARUN JOSHI'S
THE CITY AND THE RIVER

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ABSTRACT

Among the Indian English writers who qualify as existentialist, Arun Joshi is the first and finest one. His novels are strongly influenced by the existential philosophy of Sartre, Albert Camus' and Kierkegaard. His journey of fictional works from the *Foreigner* (1968) to *The City and The River* (1990) is characterised by themes of frustration, disintegration, rootlessness, a sense of alienation and existential predicament.

The present paper examines how Joshi, in his last novel, *The City and The River* (1990), delineates existential predicament of its prominent characters. The prominent characters in it carry with them a sense of alienation, loneliness and pessimism. The novel depicts the existential dilemma of its characters in hostile world but this predicament, however, has been replaced by the Socio-political crisis of the city, which is a conglomerate of individuals and can be said to represent the whole humanity.

Keywords: Alienation, absurdity, transitoriness, rootlessness, chaos, insensitivity, rationality, nothingness of life, frustration and disintegration

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The novel is a departure from the existing oeuvre of Arun Joshi in as much as it is 'a commentary on the time'¹ and "a political parable"². It presents a critique on the political scenario of the times. There are obvious parallels between the Emergency regime of 1974-75 in India and the one portrayed in the novel. The bulldozing of the huts of the mud-people to widen a street reminds us of many such deeds in the name of beautification, "Sundarikaran", of the city of Delhi at the time of Emergency. The power-structure in 'the City' bears a close resemblance to that of the emergency. The consolidation of power by the Grand Master (P.M.) to the extent of anointing himself as the King and unlimited powers is reminiscent of the then dictatorial rule in Indian history. The coronation of the Grand Master's son as the heir apparent is suggestive of the then Prime Minister's son becoming all powerful.

Cruelty and coercion, violence and destruction, selfishness and corruption, hypocrisy and deceit dominate the political and administrative fabric of society in the 'City' ruled by the Grand Master. The events portrayed in the novel are reminiscent of the days of the Emergency in India, the after-effects of which prove as ruinous to the political image of the Grand Master as it did in the case of the then Prime Minister of our

country. Not only the political image is shattered, but the wrong doer must suffer also. The novelist holds the view that one who misuses power cannot escape punishment. It does come sooner or later. Even if the wrongdoer succeeds in getting rid of all his worldly adversaries, the even-handed Divine Justice comes forward to punish him. Here in *The City and The River*, all the dissenters absolutely fail in their rebellion. The Headman (who is actually a woman) is blinded and later deserted by her own followers. Bhoma's pronouncement that the King is naked comes to a stop when he stays with the Grandfather and afterwards dies when the son demolishes the Grandfather's house in an attempt to arrest him. The Professor dies because of his fast in prison. Shailaja's brother immolates himself. But when human beings fail, it is Nature that punishes the wrongdoer. There comes a flood in the river and the king 'gazed at the vast sea in a stunned silence'. (P.257)

The inmates of the palace shuddered in horror as the new Grand Master's building broke in the middle and floor by floor, frame by frame, fell into the sea. One last wave uprooted the foundations and sent them flying into the sky. The waters swept over the top of the hill and cascaded on the other side in a loud waterfall.(P.258)

Thus, in so far as the novel exists as a powerful commentary on the political scenario of the past, the present and the future, it rightly claims a privileged place among the political novels of our literature. But in many ways it remains a continuation of Arun Joshi's earlier novels. It is an existentialist commentary on the absurdity of human situation. Like his earlier novels, herein, too, he continues to explore the existential and hostile world. Critics are almost unanimous about this aspect of his novels which have a distinguishing mark of their own and which certainly differ from those of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Malgonkar and many other Indian English novelists. Madhusudan Prasad observes that "They [Joshi's novels] are singularised by certain existentialist problems and the resultant anger, agony, psychic quest and the like".³ Inna Walter, commenting on *The Last Labyrinth*, says, "Arun Joshi plunges deeper into the depths of the electrical queries that have perplexed man's consciousness from time immemorial".⁴ Ramesh K. Srivastava observes. "Most of Arun Joshi's heroes are alienated beings."⁵ R.K. Dhawan believes that "Joshi's fictional world is a revelation of a world where man is confronted by the self and the question of this existence"⁶

In *The City and The River*, Joshi seems to be pre-occupied with certain existentialist issues. One thing new in the novel is that here his canvas has grown larger. He turns his focus from the private to the public. Instead of his pre-occupation with the existentialist predicament of an individual, here he deals with the socio-political and existentialist crisis of the entire "City" and thus of the whole humanity itself. In this novel, too, he takes up his favourite existentialist issues of faith, commitment, choice, responsibility and identity but the way he handles them is somewhat different from that of his earlier novels. Here he looks into these issues with the spectacles of politics, an equipment he has not been used to, raising the novel to the level of political allegorical satire.

The main plot of the novel revolves around the theme of power struggle. The Grand Master rules the city by the river and is determined to become its unchallenged king. His schemes meet with stiff resistance from the boatmen who refuse to fall in line with the Seven Hills. Their leader, the Headman, tells the Astrologer. "We have no quarrel with the Grand Master and we have no quarrel with you. If it is a matter of allegiance, our allegiance is only to the river and cannot be shred...". Their refusal accentuates the conflict — the conflict between *The City and The River*, between the Grand Master and the boatmen, between the urge to dominate and the desire to assert one's identity. This conflict is the life and the soul of the plot.

The atmosphere of the City is absolutely unnatural and chaotic. It reminds us to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. To quote Arun Joshi. "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 Master's great regret, neither grass nor flowers grow".(P.136) It is natural that in an unnatural atmosphere like his even sensible persons suffer from certain existentialist emotions like alienation, weariness, rootlessness, boredom and meaninglessness. For instance, there is the Rallies Master who is known to be "an unhappy man", and the real cause of his unhappiness is rootlessness. "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 ... The boatmen did not have the money to hire him, the brick-people considered him an upstart". (P.71) The Professor is 'weary' and 'tired' of the ways of the world, as he says to Little Star "I am tired of being careful. Little Star, I am weary" (P.87), Bhumputra, having been crushed by solitude and burden of human misery, feels utterly alone and alienated : "Bhoma urged him [the man] to stay because he still felt very alone" (P.157. He is "plunged into gloom" and thinks of "this own ineffective life. A sense of overwhelming futility filled him at such times, so much so that he saw no point in living." (P.174) When the Minister for Trade sees the Grand Master standing "with his face in his hands" and his chest heaving in uncontrolled emotion, he is greatly, moved. He tells the Grand Master., "You are tired in your weariness you let dark thoughts assail you.(P.203) Dharma's father suffers from "the Three Truths Syndrome, states of the soul, atrophy of the brain and locomotor functions.(P.135) He means that "we have turned into robots".(P.135) He himself admits openly. "My insides are rotting. I too am just vanishing." (P.133) He turns to his wife and says: "I am all gone, vanished". (P.134) Thus, life of a human being is reduced to "a strange sorry tale" (P.10), comprising meaningless and "pointless episodes" (P.16) signifying nothing.

In such a world as this, the protagonist is bound to create his own values which determine the way of his life. He rejects the theory of psychological determinism and leads an authentic existence which Sartre regards as "the new and absolute virtue in existentialism". Marjorie Grene aptly remarks about authenticity "The concept of authenticity is not a concept of adjustment in fact with respect to the current ideal of the well adjusted member of society it is truly and deeply a heresy".⁷ Judged from this point of view, it is only the poor boatmen living in the mud huts by the side of the river who lead an authentic existence. They are prepared to pay the price they are supposed to for the life they lead. Simple as they are, they are far away from being mere simpletons. They have the courage to be honest and bold and are able to call spade a spade. To the Grand Master, they are both "incomprehensible and stubborn." (P.14) The novelist tries to picture them clearly : "They are poor, but refuse to work for anyone except themselves When the Grand Master goes out he rarely sees them greeting him. Where others always have a ready salute for him the boatmen simply stare out of dark unblinking eyes as though he were a stranger and for their beliefs they are willing to die. And don't let their poverty mislead you into believing that they can be bought." (P.14)

The high and middle class people lack in authenticity as they get themselves adjusted to the circumstances they are put in and they never protest The level of authenticity varies in inverse proportion to the social status of the inhabitants. The social stratification is signified by the height at which the different classes of people live. Among the high class people, the Grand Master lives on the highest hill and the Ministers live and administer the City from the Seven Hills. Their status varies according to the altitude at which they live. The middle class people live on a comparatively lower ground in the colony of brick houses. The boatmen live in the area along the river bank which is the lowest in altitude. But the lowliest and the poorest boatmen living in the mud huts are the most superior as they do what they feel like doing and, thus, lead an authentic existence. The second category of the middle class people living in pink-coloured bricks buildings is inferior to the boatmen but far superior to the high class people in this regard. The middle class men lack in authenticity as they adapt themselves to the situation and they do not practice what they feel like doing. They do not protest but comparatively they are not so thick-skinned as the people belonging to the highest class are. More often than not, the middle class men slowly come to confront the reality of their situation. They come to realize their hypocrisy and begin to chaff under the burden of "bad faith" and consequently break down. For example. Dharma and his father come to have nervous breakdown on account of the realization of the loss of their authenticity. Dharma dresses himself like a boatman making atonement for the faults committed in his official capacity. Dharma's father gradually becomes a complete wreck.

The highest class people most terribly lack in authenticity. They are the most corrupt, morally bankrupt and hypocrites. They are big frauds. The Grand Master declares the Era of Ultimate Greatness for the welfare and prosperity of the City, but the main motif behind the declaration is to consolidate his own position and pave the way for the realization of his dream of becoming the king. He and his Ministers practise "Bad Faith". The Grand Mater simply believes in accepting the demands of the people but never really intends

to implement them. Once he very clearly instructs the Astrologer to issue a decree but not to think of implementing it ; "Issuing a decree, Astrologer, does not mean its immediate implementation". (P.168) The Grand Master and his sycophant coteries of over - ambitious Ministers like the Minister of Rallies, the Astrologer, the Commissioner of Police, the Commander of the Army, General Starch are the group of persons living at the highest altitude of the Seven Hills, but they miserably lack in leading an authentic life. The Ministers fail to probe the nature of their "freedom" , freedom to become "for -itself of "in -itself ".

The boatmen prove the authenticity of their selves in Heideggerian an Sartre an terms. For Heidegger, "genuine existence is existence which dares to face death".⁸ They safeguard their authenticity in Heideggerian sense in as much as they mock the threats and dangers hurled on them by the Grand Master and his fawning associates. They boldly refuse to take the oath of allegiance to the Grand Master. Their Headman (who is a woman) Symbolizes courage, strength and commitment to freedom. Of course, they have to pay a heavy price for their resistance. Their Headman has to lose her eyes. The boatmen under the guidance of the Headman defy the Triple Way intended to fortify the position of the Grand Master and force the people to yield to the repressive laws in the name of The Era of Ultimate Greatness, although every night a few boatmen are transported to the Gold Mines where a long detention causes both physical and mental deterioration and where the idea of the self (is) suitably dissolved". (P.161) A representative case of the authenticity of the mud-people is the old man named Patanjali who is arrested as a substitute of Master Bhoma. Patanjali's boldness is exemplified in his replies that he makes in answer to what the arresting police officer Dharma tells him. When Dharma tells : "You only have to apologise and you will be set free", how boldly Patanjali replies : "But why should I apologise ? I have done no wrong. Rather The Grand Master should apologise for making such absurd rules". (26). Likewise, the other boatmen follow the suit. They are imprisoned in the horrible Gold Mines, fired upon and killed, but they do not surrender. They have their authenticity in the Sartrean sense of the term. Sartre says : "For the secret of a man is not his Oedipus complex or his inferiority complex : it is the limit of his own liberty, his capacity for resisting fortune and death".⁹ Thus, the boatmen remain free seen if they are imprisoned as their liberty costs in their resistance. Bhumiputra, a mud-hut man, stands for all those who are opposed to the dictatorial rule of the Grand Master and his coteries.

Among the brick-people, too, there are some who are much concerned about the authenticity of their selves. One of them is the Professor who gives up everything, including his life, in search of his pupil Bhoma who is supposed to have been picked up by the police in one of their night operations. In spite of the warnings to abstain from doing so, he goes on with his search. Consequently, he is incarcerated in the Gold Mines where he becomes weaker and weaker day by day and ultimately dies. The Grandfather, Dharma's father's father, who rears unique roses on his farm in the barren city, is another person who dares to oppose the powerful rules. It is he who keeps Bhoma at his farm and, thus, risks his own life. Ultimately, he along with Dharma, Shailaja and Bhoma, dies in the massive attack launched by the armed forces of the Grand Master.

Now-a-days, with the rise of industrialism, commercialism and capitalism, the self is being threatened. Hence, the aspect of authentic existence has become an important issue and the question of authenticity against corrupting influences operating in society is being dealt with domineeringly in modern literature all over the world. The novelists of protest and rebellion popularly known as "the Angry Young Men" in England, and "Black Humour" and "Absurd" Movements in America underline the need to protect the authenticity of the self against the pressing power of the state, the Military bureaucracy, and social institutions. In this novel, Arun Joshi is dealing with the universal predicament of modern man who is attacked from all sides by varied forces that are working all the time to weaken him. The nature of the modern existence is expressed through the barren nature of the city where there is "so much water and yet no grass or flowers". (P.36) Like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, there is total aridity and sterility in the City where the modern man is doomed to be dry, dull and disillusioned. Living as he does in atmosphere of gloom, he is ever prepared for the tragic catastrophe. The "City" is doomed to destruction when "the river herself would become the enemy". (P.259) Consequently, the whole thing is dissolved into a mighty deluge : "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

a vast sea of water. The sea was calm and gave no hint of the agitation that had gone into its making. Of the Grand Master and his city nothing remained. (260).

But the mystic river washes away the sins of the City by this deluge and the cyclic march of humanity continues. On the ruins of that city, a new city spring up. The River flows on eternally, and the City is ruled by the Seven Hills by another Grand Master and another set of councillors. The Great Yogeshwara speaks of this cyclic March to the Nameless One in detail. It is this 'repetition of things' that imparts a new significance of life in the novel. The story ends where it begins and begins where it ends. To someone this replay, this repetition of things, might appear as a joke, but the conflict is perennial: "The conflict that shall come will also be the same; a matter of allegiance, to god or to man". (P.262) If the city is not to go dissolve again. It must purify itself "of egoism, selfishness, stupidity". (P.263) To prevent this endless repetition. This periodic disintegration, we need purity. But purity can come only through sacrifice. The 'yajna' of life 'burns only on sacrifice. When the fire is low, when the flame is dying, men must feed it with their own lives.' (P.166) This is, perhaps, the meaning of life in this meaningless world. This is the meaning of the boatmen's rebellion. The novel seems to suggest that one can realize the essence of life by liberating the self from the clutches of mercenary civilization and by paying due heed to the authentic calls of the inner being.

The novelist seems to suggest his own solution to the problem arising out of one's awareness of the lack of purpose or meaning in life. The most damaging effect is the stiffening of spontaneity of the individual's personality which has been conceived in terms of the "spontaneous assertion of (one's) individual initiative, feelings, wishes, (and) opinions." ¹⁰ A realization of the meaninglessness in life is a prelude to its diagnosis and cure. According to Knoff, the process of creating meaninglessness itself becomes centrally meaningful. Becker holds that various states of alienation, including meaninglessness, tend to become in proper hands quests for value, significance, meaning and transcendence, ¹¹ In *The City and The River*, "Only the great river knows the true meaning. (P.228) The City, however, abounds in "Tall structures of steel and glass" (P.12), but it is "falling apart". (P.199)

In this novel, Arun Joshi seems to suggest that the cure of all sorts of problems is to be found within oneself. "The cure, surely, is within oneself". (P.69) Human heart must be pure, and this purification can come only through sacrifice. Like *The Last Labyrinth*, this novel, too, emphasizes the significance of prayer, faith, understanding and truth. Whatever life's problems are, we have no option but to trust and pray if we want to lead a really peaceful life. As Kierkegaard says: "Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays". (P.118) Prayers and vows perfect a person. In this novel, Joshi puts forward his hypothesis through the Astrologer: "Ours is a spiritual civilization. It is through prayer and through vows that a man perfects himself", (P.100). Understanding brings tranquility (P.9) and enables us to "learn only by ourselves". (P.142) A clear understanding or intuitive self-knowledge unfolds Truth which "destroys the falsehood at its very roots, (and) leaves all men free to choose as they will". (P.112)

The novel explores the relevance of God to man and affirms that "the world belongs to God and to no one else". "God is the highest Truth as it is known to each one of us". (P.70) "He is the noblest thing each one of us can imagine (P.70). The belief in God restores peace to human soul. (P.76) The only solution to life's problems lies in complete surrender to His Will: "In the great hand of God we stand, and can only do our best. For the rest, it is His Law and His Will". (P.157) Although the sceptics like the Grand Master have their sceptical ejaculations: "And God — What is God? Where is He? Does He even exist? he must surely have other things to worry about than intervene in the affairs of this city where we in any case now rule (P.219), the final message, however, of the novel is summed up in the Great Yogeshwara's words spoken to the Nameless - One by way of a consolatory advice: "In any case we are only instruments — both you and I — of the greater God in the highest heaven who is the Master of the inverse. How perfect we are as instruments is all that matters. His is the will, His is the force. But I shall be with you always." (P.262)

Thus *The City and The River*, is far more optimistic than Arun Joshi's earlier novels. He holds that the element of evil does exist, but it cannot last forever. Moreover, since God resides in each soul, "Is not, therefore, always room for hope? We never know when the soul of a Grand Master is touched and in that

hour his life is transformed." (P.263) Joshi repeatedly reassures that "all should be well" (P.29), that "there is a season for everything," (114), and that "Time will settle things". (P.218)

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