Existential Predicament in Arun Joshi’s

The City and the River

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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.

Before embarking upon an investigation of existential predicament in The City and the River, the fifth and the last novel of Joshi, let us first decide to what constitutes existential predicament or ‘existentialism’. As a modern philosophic movement, ‘existentialism’ deals with man’s disillusionment and despairs. It is originated in philosophical and literary writing of Satre and Camus’. Mr. M. H. Abrams, in his A Glossary of Literary Terms defines it as:

“a tendency to view each man as an isolated being who is cast ignominiously into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent human truth, value or meaning and to represent man’s life, as it moves from the nothingness which is both anguished and absurd” (1971:86).

As a philosophic idealism, ‘existentialism’, in due course of time developed into a powerful revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and the traditional ways in which early philosopher portrayed man. Man’s autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and the
nothing-ness of life are some of the existential themes which are reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism.

*The City and the River* (1990), is a study of 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 The novel depicts the existential dilemma of its characters in hostile world but this predicament, however, has been replaced by the socio-political crisis of the city, which is a conglomerate of individuals and can be said to represent the whole humanity.

The novel is divided into eleven sections including a Prologue and an Epilogue. It depicts the struggle between the Grand Master and the Boatmen. The Grand Master, who rules the City by the river, is determined to become its unchallenged king. His intentions are reinforced by the existence of an old prophecy. The Grand master demands the allegiance from the Boatmen. Master Bhoma, (Bhumiputra) and other rebellions of the boatmen stubbornly insists on offering allegiance to the river alone and remains unshaken from their native sanguinity. The Boatmen’s leader, Headman tells that they owe their allegiance “only to the river” (19). To them the river is “a symbol of the divine mother. Of God Himself” (22). They regard themselves as “children of the great river” (19). The grand master and the Boatmen represent the urge to dominate and the desire to assert one’s identity respectively.

The city, depicted in the novel is itself rootless and alien to the natural atmosphere. This city abounds in “tall structures of steel and glass” (12) but is “falling apart before our eyes” (199) City’s atmosphere is so unnatural that neither grass nor flower grow on the Seven Hills.

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 Masters great regrets, neither grass nor flowers grow (136).
In this “city of wonders” (31), the palace lawns “leave much to be desired. All brown and yellow. No trees, no flowers. Not a patch of green” (31). In city, ‘The road was wide and well-paved but it was treeless and without flowers” (31). The people, except boatmen, are generally “subdued and not [in] their normal self” (96). There is “nothing to change, no new idea to survive” (55) in the city. In it “nothing was moving in the right direction or, if anything was, it move at a snail’s pace” (55) and hence everyone “was waiting for something to happen” (55). “Chaos is piled upon chaos” (180) is the final impression of the city.

In such a setting, the characters feel their existence rootless, absurd and are in search for something meaningful. Life seems to them as merely “a strange sorry tale” (10) comprising “pointless episodes” (10).

The master of Rallies, a child of boatman, for example, is “an unhappy man” (71) 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. For fifteen years, they spent all their earning on him. The Master of Rallies was good at studies but after fifteen years when he completed them, like the Education Advisor, he too discovered that no one wanted his services. The boatmen did not have the money to hire him; the brick-people considered him an upstart (71).

He appears as “tired” (76), ‘afraid of humiliation” (75) and at “no peace” (76). He says,

I have no family, no wish to get rich. I do not wish to become famous; I have no friends to lose. Am I afraid of going to prison? In fact I (am, but why?). There is no one to mourn me, nor do I have commitments that would suffer (75).

It accounts his alienation and rootlessness.

The professor, a star watcher and a teacher of Master Bhoma, apart from his scholarship is weary and tired “I am tired of being careful … I am weary” (87).
search for Bhumiputra “had turned into a search for some lost bit of himself” (159). His quest leads him to imprisonment at Gold Mines. He expresses in disgust:

Forgive me; I have spent my life in sleep. My life has been a joke, even as the lives of brick-people are a joke ... I have squandered it on baubles” (163).

In extreme sorrow, he expresses “I am lost” (163).

Crushed by solitudes and weight of human misery, even Bhumiputra, a teacher of Mathematics and disciple of professor “felt very alone”(157). He was forced to roam in wilderness, after having the feeling of “wandering through a desert land” (176). Like Sindi Oberoi in The foreigner, Bhumiputra finds the meaning of his life not in escape but in action. He decides to fight with Grand Master. He excites the demoralized boatmen by reminding them that they are children of the sacred river and they should not sell their soul to a man however powerful he may be. But soon, “A sense of overwhelming futility filled him at such times, so much so that he saw no point in living” (174). Sometime, he feels “so old and lonely and useless” (150).

The case of the Grand Master is not very different. The minister for Trade frankly tells the Grand Master that he is “tired” (203) and that in his “weariness” (203) he lets “his dark thoughts assail” (203) him. The music “disturb” (203) him. He hears “within its notes the echoes of a mocking laugh” (203). According to M. Mani Meithei, “It is his inordinate desire to become a king that leads him from one chaotic step to another, alienating himself from his subjects” (1997:53). The delay in the prophecy’s fulfillment and the growing anger of the people make the headstrong Grand Master impatient. He suffers from a crisis of trust and grows suspicious of his own advisers: “Who is there in the wider world that I can trust?” (57).

Dharma’s father, a profiteer, suffers from a strange kind of disease. He feels like crying, yet cannot cry. He stands before mirror and raves. A hole appears in his image
reflected in the mirror and he begins to think, that “My insides are rotting. I too am vanishing (133). He is damned to suffer from the “Three Truths Syndrome, stasis of the soul. Atrophy of the brain and locomotor functions” (135). The stiffness of his joints is symptomatic of the hardening of his soul. His condition degenerates each day so much so that “his mind turned blank, [and] his will was reduced to zero” (134). His doctor tells him in good faith: “Exercise your soul” (134) as medical treatment will not cure him.

Dharma, a Police Officer, too, feels alienated. When The Grand trader offers him a silver chair to sit on, he finds it “surprisingly uncomfortable” (91) Dharma wonders how a Grand Trade is in league with powerful persons with whom he shares his profits. After knowing it, in his anguish, “For many weeks, he had been having trouble deciding whether he was living in a city that he used to know” (93).

Thus the prominent characters in the novel, suffer from existential predicament for different reasons. “They suffer from alienation, weariness, boredom, rootless ness, meaninglessness in their lives” (Sharma: 2003:84). In this relentless search “they withdraw from human ambience to natural environs of peace and tranquility but here too they find no response and equanimity. They are nowhere men in quest of a somewhere place” (Swain 1999:118). They are tormented by their hollow existence. Joshi is obsessively occupied with the individual’s quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world. Existential conflict in Joshi springs from the self’s craving for the fulfillment of certain psycho-emotional needs, from the desire to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of listlessness.
ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES


Joshi, Arun. 1994. *The City and the River* New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks. (All the page references in parentheses are to this edition only)


Swain, Dr. S. P. and Samartray, Mrs. S. 1999. “The Problem of Alienation and the Quest for Identity in Joshi Novels”. In Bhatnagar: 114-120.