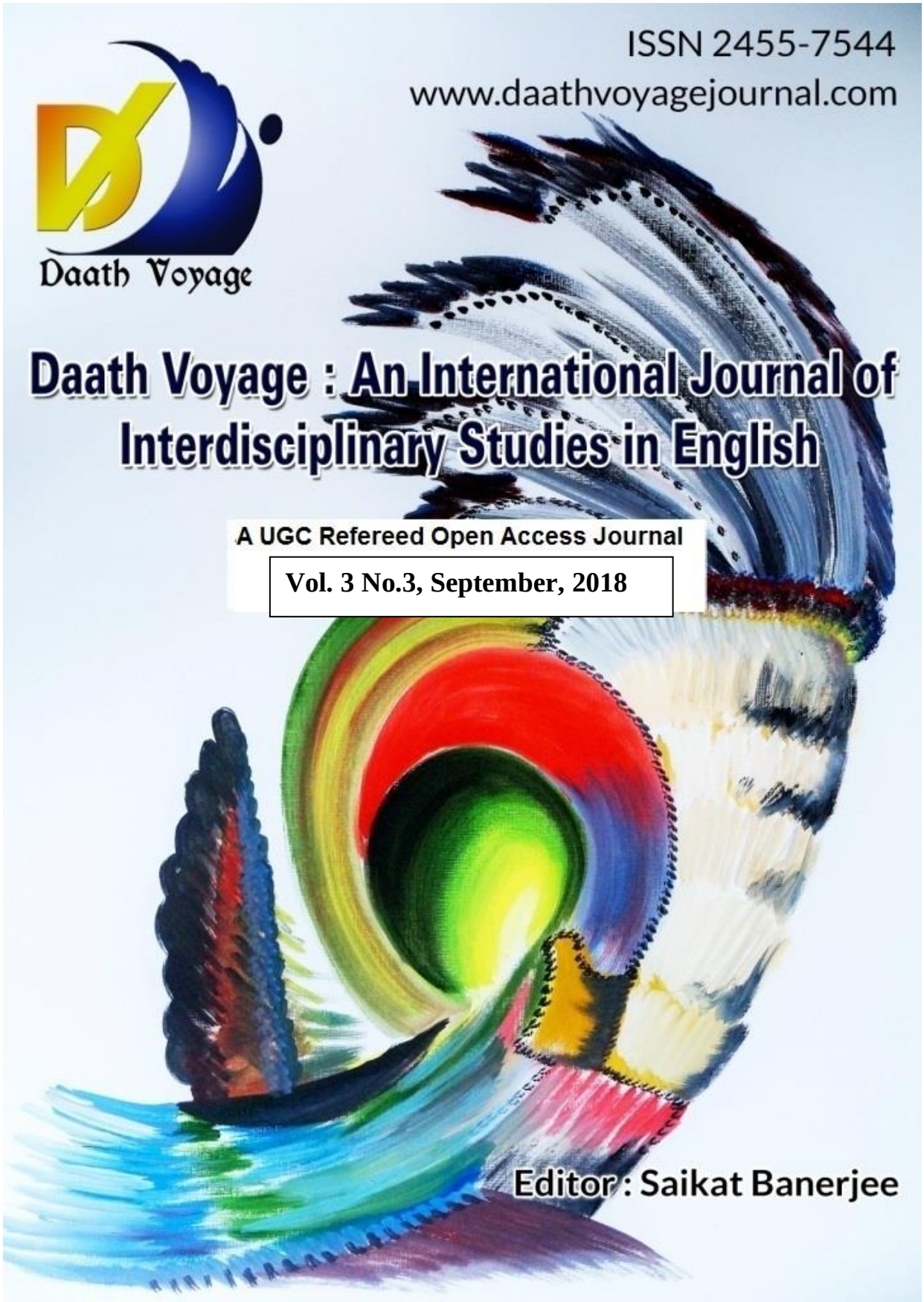

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Arun Joshi's *The City and the River:* Understanding River as Metaphor of Environmental Resistance to Colonial Modernity

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Abstract: The genealogy of 'modernity' in India is intricately linked up with the historical processes of colonial rule. The intervention of western imperialism not only "virtually reshape(d) the social, ecological and demographic characteristics of the habitats they intrude(d) upon, they also ensured that the ensuing changes would primarily benefit Europe" (Ramachandra Guha 1992). Partha Chatterjee in 'Our Modernity' (1997) apprehends, "… given the close complicity between modern knowledges and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would be taken seriously as its producers". However, quite contrarily, the native inhabitants who live close to nature or almost fully dependent on nature for livelihood have remained unambiguous in their resistance to the urbanizing and modernizing projects of imperialism. This study feels it important to understand the attitudes and relations of these indigenous people to the colonial modernistic forces by analysing the use of images, rhetoric and situatoions in Arun Joshi's novel, *The City and the River* (1990) and through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism in order to understand at large how the river based natives in India counter the colonial modernizing processes.

Keywords: River, Environment, Eco-system people, Colonial Modernity, Alternate Modernity.

The history of 'modernity' in India cannot be discussed without accounting for the colonial processes of western imperialism and its subsequent damages, both physical and virtual, it has

inflicted upon the indigenous society, economy and the environment of India. In their capitalist and post industrialist pursuits for increasing profit by exploiting human and natural resources from non-European nations like India, the colonial masters of European modernity have long subjugated and thwarted the possibilities of its own indigenous form of modernity. Ramachandra Guha observes that the intervention of western imperialism not only 'virtually reshape(d) the social, ecological and demographic characteristics of the habitats they intrude(d) upon, they also ensured that the ensuing changes would primarily benefit Europe' (Guha 1992). This exploitative mechanism, in the form of neocolonial state forces, corporate capitalists, continues to exploit natural environments including the poor living along river basins or forests, often as nomads consequently affecting the ecological balance of the nation. However, while most of the modern reformers in post-independence India had remained indifferent at the processes and consequences of environmental degradation, the commitment of these poor inmates to natural environment in different parts of India deserves special attention. Arun Joshi's (1939-1993) *The City and the River* (1990), a 'parable of the times' offers ample insights into how a considerable section of hardworking indigenous river based communities struggle to sustain an unconditional and unambiguous resistance to the urbanizing and modernizing projects of state which most often act in collaboration with global capitalists, urban planners and so on.

Arun Joshi's fifth and the last novel, *The City and the River* is written in the mode of allegorical narrative reflecting socio-political milieu of the times. The plot with its experimental mixture of facts and fantasy, myth and vision, politics and corruption, attempts to map the contours of continuous exploitation of the poor and the ecological resources, and their struggle against the nonchalant aggressions of colonial or rather neocolonial masters. Its narrative, highly allegorical is fluid enough to be limited to a particular historical fact. Perceivably, names of the major characters and places are common nouns, the city is addressed as 'city', river as the 'river', the ruler as 'the Grandmaster', head of the boatmen as 'Headman' and so on. The Grandmaster rules a 'modern' city

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situated by a river and he is ready to cross any limit of tyranny over both the human and natural subjects in order to persist his kingship unchallenged.

Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha in their seminal work *Ecology and Equity: the Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (1995) analysed the processes of environmental degradation and social conflict in terms of the inequities in access to natural resources. They divided 'India's biomass-based society' into three broadly different categories: 'omnivores', 'ecosystem people', and 'ecological refugees', based on their relation to the environment (Gadgil and Guha 137). For them, ecosystem people are the local communities 'who have served as stewards of these natural resources for centuries'; the bureaucracies are the 'regulators' or 'manipulators' often in the form of contractors in dam construction or even 'manufacturers' of sugar or paper ; and ecological refugees do not belong to any of the above categories and are mostly peasants evicted from homelands due to some natural calamities take refuge in a vacant land such as forest or 'ghats' (banks) of a river (137). Guha explains, "The history of development in independent India can then be interpreted as being, in essence, a process of resource capture by the 'omnivores' at the expense of 'ecosystem' people. This has in turn created a third major ecological class: that of 'ecological refugees', peasants-turned-slum dwellers, who eke out a living in the cities on the leavings of omnivore prosperity" (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997).

In tune with Guha and Matinez-Alier's notion, this study regards the boatmen and others, living along the river banks and depending entirely on ecological resources for their livelihood, as belonging to the group called 'eco-system people'. Likewise, the masons and laborers called 'the brick-people' in the novel, who work in the city and live in the 'brick colony' a residence(mostly a rental house) within the city accommodated for such daily workers are considered as belonging to the 'ecological refugees'. According to Guha, these ecological refugees are but the surplus rural workers who desperately migrate into cities for jobs on daily or monthly basis following huge imbalance between the scopes for agricultural or domestic works in villages and the number of workers; an imbalance resulting from indiscriminate exploitation of ecological resources by

capitalist forces. Both of these groups are subjects to persistent deprivation along with the depletion of ecological resources. Therefore, this article seeks to analyse the struggles of the two classes, the ecosystem system people represented by the boatmen led by the headmen, and the ecological refugees, represented by the laborious brick-people in *The City and the River*.

In this context, this article analyzes the dominant and recurring images, rhetoric and allegorical situations in the novel to address the following hypothetical following questions. First, which circumstances and motivations lead these down to earth people to confront undauntedly against the neocolonial modernistic forces represented by despotic rulers and their associates consisting of power hungry sycophants? Secondly, how do these personal struggles for their identity against the (neo)colonial atrocities offer insights at the national struggle for indigenous traditions and environmental concerns? Thirdly, how do their ideals and values, for the cause of which they are ready to die, without their knowledge, metaphorically corresponds with those asserted by the modern makers of India, especially by Mohandas K. Gandhi?

Partha Chatterjee in his lecture on 'Our Modernity' expresses his anxiety at the impact of modernity on a once-colonised nation-state and apprehends that "… given the close complicity between modern knowledges and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would be taken seriously as its producers"(1997). After critically examining crucial essays of Rajnarayan Basu, Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault, Chatterjee here conceptualizes modernity as 'the first social philosophy which conjures up in the minds of the most ordinary people dreams of independence and self-rule'(20). In line with the postcolonial ecocriticism, especially with Ramchandra Guha's conceptualization of environmentalism, I would like to assert here the consideration of environmental concerns as a crucial addition as complementary to the discussion of 'modernity' in India because the root of most of the individual or class conflicts following questions of social justice lies at the environmental crisis or ecological imbalance as a consequence of unequal distribution, consumption and hoarding of natural

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resources. River being one of the most potential natural resources has always attracted the establishment of human civilization down the ages.

River has always been a reliable repository to provide people with ample resources for livelihood. In ancient India, many civilizations like Indus-valley have flourished centering river. Hence, it has been often employed in literature as an important motif and even its palpable presence can be traced back to the ancient scriptures of Indian tradition. In India, river is worshipped as a divine manifestation; hence rivers like the Ganga, Bramhaputra, Krishna, Meghna, Tista etc are named after Hindu gods and goddesses. In many novels, river becomes a dynamic character directing the course of the narratives along with the changes in its course or flow of water. In Arun Joshi's *The City and the River* the unnamed river which can stand for any river in India is worshipped by the boatmen as divine-mother: "They also consider themselves as Her children and show allegiance to none but Her only. They consider themselves to be the children of the river, and to the river and the river alone they hold their allegiance"(14). This deeper sense of spiritual communion with river, forest and other natural objects reflects at large the indigenous sensibilities of a nation state. This attitude of care and nurture towards nature is in sharp contrast with the aggressive outlook of western imperialists who see in nature nothing more than resources for lucrative production and profit. In the novel, the headman and the other boatmen's adoration of river is looked upon with disgust and hatred by Grandmaster's father: "They believe, unfortunately, with their hearts and for their beliefs they are willing to die"(14). And the ruling authority even thinks of subjugating the boatmen's simple pantheistic creed with money and power. Such attitude of looking at both the poor and the ecological resources as marketable commodity has become almost a common discourse today. The common idiomatic expression, 'Everyone has his price, father', uttered by the Grandmaster does not extol any democratic value of human individuals, rather contrary to its literal meaning, the statement reinforces such discourses as taking for granted the commoditization of both the human laborers and natural resources like river, trees, plants including mineral resources such as gold, coal, stones, earth and so on. Given the minimum number

of gold resources in India (with only three working gold mines: two in Karnataka and one in Jharkhand), apparently, the images of indiscriminate gold quarry in the novel may seem highly fantastic and baseless. But it would be no far from truth if one takes gold merely as a symbol for abduction of other amply available mineral resources like coal, stones, earth and so on. This is simply because coals, stones and earth are, though in a capitalist market of lesser value than gold, ironically much more valuable than gold in a densely populated country like India, both in terms of their inevitable significance for maintaining ecological balance in order to minimize the possibility of natural catastrophic disaster , and also in terms of their potential utility for subsistence and survival of the eco-system people as well as the ecological refugees who being rendered homeless for natural calamities or other urgent situations take shelter at riverbanks or edges of forest temporarily.

The native beliefs of these 'eco-system people', which forms largely of what may be called indigenous or 'alternative modernity', are found constantly in conflict with the projects of western colonial modernity allegorically represented here by the father of the present despotic ruler called the Grandmaster and/or their neo-colonial agents, the Grandmaster himself and his councilors including the astrologer. These people are not conscious fighters for ecological resources, yet in their role of resisting their own socio-political and cultural identity they have sustained a revolutionary spirit in them that largely pertains to much of what constitutes part of the nation's indigenous ideology of alternate development along with an organic ecological sustainability. Explaining the role of the poor in environmental movements, Martinez – Alier in his Preface to the book, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (2002) remarks: "I do not argue that poor people are always and everywhere environmentalists, since this is patent nonsense. I argue that in ecological distribution conflicts the poor are often on the side of resource conservation and a clean environment, even when they themselves do not claim to be environmentalists" (Preface viii). Following the industrial revolution, colonial masters of European modernity blinded by their capitalist lust for economic gain and material power have always looked

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upon river along with other natural elements like trees, plants, soil etc as nothing more than industrial resources for exploitation at their whims. In view of Martinez-Alier's observation, it is perceivably safe to say that when power-mongered neo-colonial masters exercise their narrow and self-centered economic policies as universal rules at the expense of the interests of 'ecosystem people' and 'ecological refugees', the latter ,in actual praxis, become part of environmental movements and confront capitalist monopolization in their own ways. If the ruling authority has exercised despotic homogenisation by attempting forceful subjugation of the 'others' in the name of declaring an 'emergency' or so , they face unambiguous confrontation from these communities. However, their friction is not always violent, nor well organized. The roots of the recent urgency of population control, apparently for the sake the common good is well exposed by the sensible arguments of the woman representative of the boatmen in the novel:

> By the grace of the river and the mountain rain is made. By the grace of the mother earth a crop is grown. What is grown is plentiful for all and many more. But the crop is then pasted with labels of money and the mud people do not have money and so they are seen running here and there fighting over trifles. Thus is God's law twisted in the hands of the Seven Hills and then the Seven Hills turn to look at us and say 'Ah, there are too many of you.'(20)

By arguing for social justice of the river based poor, the boatmen, who in the novel, consider themselves 'children of the river'(19), the above argument inevitably reflects a simultaneous concern for ecological balance and environmental justice. The mud-men's high esteem for the river cannot be sidelined here as sheer blind faith. Their contention bears deep ecological bases especially when they claim of the contribution of river and the mud-men in the formation and smooth flourishing of what they call modern city. Headman's remark points to such role of the river and her (the river's) children: "… all know it is the boatmen's blood down the ages that has saved the city from annihilation…" (21). And this is later confirmed by Bhoma's speech at a gathering of the boatmen:

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> Brothers and sisters, the pyramids, the palace, the Seven Hills, deaf though they now be to the boatman's cries, it is by the sweat of the boatmen's brow that such things are built. And it is by the sweat of his brow that the brick mansions are built, and avenues laid, and avenues made straight, and the armour of the soldier bought. It is by your sweat, my brothers, that the wealth of this city is produced. (178)

Among some other few illustrations of such exploitation one can be noted here from the chapter, 'A New Decree', where the images of helplessness of both the boatmen as well as of the river are decipherable when the Grandmaster introduced motorboats as vehicles for transport in response to the boatmen's calling off boat-strike: "At the end of the twenty four hours the boatmen's licenses were cancelled. Naval boats took over the task of river transport. The idle boatmen sat all day on the river bank and watched the motorized vessels speed to and fro. At night the Captain of the Flying Patrol launched a massive dragnet to sweep in as many boatmen as possible"(180). Again, the acts of using explosives and firing in many occasions as a shock to deter the rebellious boatmen also equally affect the river by contaminating water and causing threats to aquatic animals in particular and affecting thereby the larger ecological balance. All these tyrannous policies of imported mode of 'colonial modernity' caused massive damage to both the river and her children.

Gandhi's political philosophy has much environmental concerns and he believed that "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed" (Gandhi, 1998). His principles of 'Satyagraha'(commitment to truth), 'Swaraj' (self-government) and ahimsa (non-violence) speak for the combined interests of the human and natural world. He was against the Western policy of 'mass production' and instead proposed for a system of production by mass. The headman's statements in the novel about the sufficient resources before capitalistic exploitation reflect Gandhi's environmental concerns about ecological balance. The boatmen's calling of non-violent strikes against the Grandmaster reminds the readers of non-cooperation movement against the British led by Gandhi in the 1920s and his rejection of the highly exploitative machinery and technologies in favour of small indigenous industries. In the novel, the Hermit of the Mountain sees the downfall of the modern city as a consequence of the dominant section of people's deviation

from the Truth in the mindless lust for power. He asserts "Truth… is what destroys the falsehood at its very roots, what leaves all men free to choose as they will" (112). Adherence to truth is the only spirit required for sustaining uncompromising resistance to dominance of power. This is reminiscent of Gandhi's practicing of 'Satyagraha', i.e., insisting or holding on to truth, which is a particular way of non-violent resistance.

The City and the River remains an allegorical narrative of both political and ecocritical exploitation of river and its children. Through its unique method of mixing patterns of discourses with fantasy, the novel explores the trajectory of environmental-polity and history of India. Apparently the dialectics of the two worlds mentioned in the title caters to the relations and nuances between a good many other crucial dialectics: the ruler and the ruled, the urban and the rural, machine(explosive arms, motorized boats, helicopters as mentioned in the novel) and the environment, colonial modernity and the indigenous spirituality, capitalism and the native ecological balance and many more. The rationale behind recurrent frictions between them is not always only that of power as Chatterjee asserted: "There is no promised land of modernity outside the network of power" (19). It can be persuasively deduced what Ramachandra Guha added as 'modes of (ecological) resource use' that have governed these confrontations down the ages.

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