

The One Who Walks On Water – An Analysis

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Among contemporary Kannada short story writers, **Dr. Shantharam Somayaji** holds a prominent place. His narrative style is distinctly different from that of other writers, and the story “*The One Who Walks on Water*” serves as an excellent example of this uniqueness. He has published several collections of short stories, including *Kempu Hoo*, *Mannina Bale*, *Jeevajala*, *Neera Mele Nadeyuvavanu*, *Arthamantri Mattu Handigalu*, *Jaji Hoovina Kattu*, and *Stories from America*. His notable novel is *Preetiya Kannu*. Additionally, he has authored several engineering textbooks in English. Born in 1947, Somayaji served as a professor at California State University in the United States.

The story “*The One Who Walks on Water*” is taken from his collection bearing the same name. Both the narration and the theme it explores are noteworthy.

This is a rare story. Though curious and intriguing, it compels deep thought about the issues it presents. The author's narrative style is captivating, maintaining the reader's interest throughout, with every incident sparking both curiosity and surprise. From a narrative standpoint, it is a successful short story.

The narrator's manner of introducing a foreign culture—different from their own—is beautiful. It doesn't feel foreign at all but instead immerses the reader. The city of Balasore in Odisha is described as “like a wrinkled old man's body,” while the village Chandrapur (or Chandpur) is “like a grass hut,” vividly portraying the state of the city and village. Descriptions like a tap “which, like a sly boy hiding something, had hidden the water” are especially creative.

A striking aspect of the story is society's **indifference** toward the man who walks on water. While the narrator is in awe—“Like a villager seeing skyscrapers for the first time, I watched the man walking on water with bated breath, eyes wide open” (p.113)—others around him display apathy and even contempt.

For instance, when asked about the man, a neighbor just shrugs off the question like someone who has just seen a dull black cat. “He walked on water? Big deal. Maybe tomorrow he'll walk on air too,” says a boy repairing a radio (p.113). Similarly, when the narrator asks a military colonel, he replies dismissively: “You people should just focus on learning to eat quietly. That would be something special for you.” (p.118) According to him, the man is nothing but “a bloody nuisance.”

Later, when the narrator finds the man's dead body and inquires with a newspaper vendor, the vendor replies, “Yeah, they were saying something like that. But what's the point? A man who can't afford a meal—what good is it if he walks on water or oil?” (p.124) These responses highlight how society dismisses talents that don't provide practical value.

The **primary reason** for this neglect is that the man doesn't work or contribute economically. The colonel voices this sentiment, stating:

“That's exactly why our country is failing. If everyone took responsibility, we'd be ahead of the U.S.A. But three-quarters of our people are like this—walking on water, walking on fire, walking on air, holding their breath and walking. They're all rascals.”

This reveals a societal mindset that undervalues skills with no direct utility.

Another major theme of the story is this: **Talent or skill must benefit society**, or at least have some practical value. Otherwise, it is seen as useless. India has had many great minds and rare skills since ancient times, but due to rigid traditional attitudes, these talents were not nurtured and often disappeared. The narrator expresses this concern:

“If the people of this country knew that there was someone with such a miraculous skill...”
(p.121).

However, the man himself is not interested in fame. He learned the art from his father. He believes it should not be taught to women, nor be demonstrated for money or fame, and must be passed on only to one's own son. Because of such **superstitions and customs**, this rare skill is ultimately wasted—like a salted pickle that can't be eaten. Gradually, the art fades into oblivion. The author subtly suggests this through the story.

Although the man has a **remarkable talent**, his **character flaws lead to his downfall**. His tendency to lie and demand money turns people away from helping him. Even when he tells the truth, no one believes him. His laziness and refusal to pursue other work contribute further to his demise.

Ultimately, **no matter how gifted a person is**, it is essential that they earn **respect through responsible behavior**. Society grants a place only to those who act with integrity. This message is beautifully conveyed by the newspaper vendor:

“Do you get what I'm saying? Once you're born human, shouldn't you earn at least a little respect? Otherwise, wouldn't we be worse than animals? If a man begs like a dog, what's the point?”

The narrator silently nods in agreement—this is one of the key messages of the story.

Above all, the **narration style** stands out. It is sprinkled with witty and flavorful dialogues. For instance, when the narrator says to the colonel, “Sir, I saw something strange,” the colonel replies:

“You didn't see my wife, did you? She's such a bizarre creature—seeing her first thing in the morning is never a good omen.”

On another day, when the colonel sends a note instead of coming himself, it reads:

“Our home's strange creature (my wife) hasn't returned from jogging. But we've left behind two other strange creatures wagging their tails. Don't wait for us.”

Such playful exchanges add **humor** and a **dramatic tone**, making the story especially engaging.