



A Critical Study Of An Intrrogating Tradition In Anantha Murthy's Novels

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Abstract

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This journal concludes denying the fact that Annadhamurthy has done in the Indian literature great by his novels, Samskara, Bhrathibutra, Awasthe and Bhava.

KEY WORDS: Culture, Community, Caste, Economy, Gender and Untouchability

INTRODUCTION

Childhood, death, the magic of words, immortality, these words perhaps sum up the major preoccupations of this eminent Kannada writer. As an outstanding creative writer, critic, editor and teacher, U.R. Anantha Murthy has had a seminal impact on Kannada literature and culture in the last few decades and is one of the most charismatic Indian literary ' personalities living today.

Born into an orthodox Vaidika brahmin family in Melige, a small village in the Tirthalli taluka of Karnataka, Udipi Rajagopalacharya Anantha Murthy was named after Anhatpadmanabha, the famous deity of Kerala. His early education was acquired in Sanskrit at a traditional pathashala. But the brahmin boy, who "grew up with a fascination for the Sanyasi", was inducted into a socialist ideology even while he was in school.(1) He recalls how in a single day he would be "exposed to worldviews of different centuries and they coexisted in my mind." (2) He contends that this bewildering coexistence of centuries in his being is also specifically a legacy of his father who walked a curious path between tradition and change.

About the impact of his family, especially of his father UR Annatha Murthy says: "My father was full of contradictions. He was a self-taught man who managed to escape from his priesthood, passed many examinations privately, taught himself astrology, astronomy and mathematics and got himself ultimately entangled in the intricacies of law for a livelihood. He had a great wealth of English words in print, but not as a spoken language. He took more care that I learnt by heart Burke's speech impeaching Warren Hastings than the *Purusha Sukta*, a great hymn of the Vedas. This was an exercise he gave me to increase my vocabulary and I chanted the speech exactly like a mantra. How absurd I should have looked then I Sitting cross-legged in an agrahara on the bank of a river." (3)

Samskara presents before us a community of persons who are interlocked with each other through various complex relationships- caste, economy, gender, societal hierarchy, religious questions and taboos ferment a complex web of relationships, against the backdrop of which the story line has been sketched. Superficially the novel deals with the dilemma of performing the last rites of Naranappa, a rebellious Brahmin who could not be excommunicated from his community by the rest of the Brahmins: yet at another level it also judges the quality of an entire way of life through two major characters, Praneshacharya and Naranappa, who are presented as foil and counterfoil to each other.

These characters are affected, albeit in non-identical manner, by the traditions of their milieu, help to define it, and are absolute ends in themselves. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*, narrates the story of a decadent Brahmin settlement in Karnataka in pre-Independent India perhaps decade or two before Independence. Praneshacharya, the protagonist, is an honest and learned Brahmin revered by all except the anti-hero Naranappa. The Acharya is married to a cripple for many years and has been taking care of her, besides also giving religious discourses to the community and doing his priestly duties at the Hanuman temple. This he has been doing day after day without demur- in fact, with a great sense of self-fulfillment. This is because he believes that everything is pre-ordained and the scriptures have the answers to all the human problems. The aim of man is liberation from the cycle of rebirth and for him the path to liberation is righteous living. Although he knows that the Brahmins of the settlement are far off the mark, still there may be some hope for them if they follow the path. But there is one man, Naranappa, who seems to be irredeemable. A lapsed Brahmin by choice, Naranappa lives a totally free and wayward life and threatens to convert to Islam if formally ostracized. He drinks, smokes, eats meat, does everything that an orthodox Brahmin ought not to do, and he even has an outcaste woman, Chandri, for a concubine.

Of the same age and lineage, Naranappa is a challenge not only to the moral integrity of the Acharya but everything that he stands for. One day he dies and Chandri comes to the Acharya with a problem: Naranappa being childless, who is to cremate his body and conduct the death ceremony? As an untouchable woman, she herself cannot do it. Will the Brahmins of the settlement do it? The dilemma is that although he revolted against Brahminism, Naranappa is a Brahmin by birth, and therefore his body should be cremated according to Brahminic customs; but he is also an outcaste to Brahminism and therefore no Brahmin will agree to cremate his body and conduct the death ceremony. (The word 'samskara', originally Sanskrit, has multiple meanings in the text but death ceremony is the predominant one.)

Samskara is a serious novel, dealing with the traditional ritual of the cremation of the dead body of a Brahmin. In the entire novel, Anantha Murthy has made an attempt to differentiate between the appearance and reality by adopting a series of literary devices, such as symbols, myths, irony, satire and humour, among others. The basic purpose behind Anantha Murthy's novel is his desire to show that a highly learned Brahmin, such as Praneshacharya, fails in understanding the reality of the world by adhering to the theoretical, bookish, outdated and even decadent traditions and rituals.

As a religious novel about a decaying Brahmin colony in the south Indian village of Karnataka. *Samskara* serves as an allegory rich in realistic detail, a contemporary reworking of ancient Hindu themes and myths, and a serious, poetic study of a religious man living in a community of priests gone to seed. A death, which stands as the central event in the plot, brings in its wake a plague, many more deaths, live questions with only dead

answers, moral chaos, and the rebirth of one man (Sura 4).

The novel is not just about decay nor about Brahmins, not just about a village in the grip of a plague nor about the centrality of death, not just about Hindu myths and rituals nor about the spiritual rebirth of one man. It is about all of those things together with something more fundamental, pervasive, and essentially opposite to the apparent centrality of death in the fictional plot: it is the continuity of life across a landscape haunted by death, *Samskara*'s message is the assertion of life and its inextinguishable presence in the midst of extinction, physical or metaphysical, individual or communal, visible or invisible, not because of but in spite of the forces of nihilism and despair.

BHARATHIPURA

Bharathipura (1973) is another significant novel of UR Anantha Murthy in Kannada and it was translated into English by P. Sreenivasa Rao in 1996. Bharathipura is a political novel with a Lohiaite slant. It sets up a clash between the left-wing liberalism (representing modernity) and the forces of tradition (Untouchability and the rigid hierarchy of caste) in a small Malenad village of the erstwhile Mysore state in the late sixties. If *SAMSKARA* is about scepticism and religious orthodoxy, *BHARATHIPURA* goes about establishing a dialectic between 'existential socialism' and traditional hierarchies in rural India.

BHARATHIPURA belongs to a category of novels which may be described as Gandhian novels. The Gandhian pre-occupation with removing the evil of untouchability has fascinated many an Indian writer and made them choose to depict the plight of the untouchables as their themes. Mulk Raj Anand is one of the foremost Indo-English novelists to write novels based on the theme of untouchability. His *UNTOUCHABLE* has won the admiration among not only Indians but westerners as well. Raja Rao's *KANTHAPURA* also has 'untouchability' as one of the themes. Malayalam writers like Shivashankar Pillai described the suffering experienced by the most underprivileged people. Another Kannada writer Karanth has a similar account of the privation and alienation experienced by the untouchables in his *CHOMANADUDI*.

It therefore becomes clear that there are quite a few Indian writers who were influenced by Gandhi's fight against the social evil of untouchability. Though the theme is the same, the perspectives seem to differ. None of the novels mentioned above have the same angle of vision and each work examines the problem in a certain way. For Mulk Raj Anand whose method is 'satire' and whose mode is 'realism' the untouchability is an evil which can be removed by conversions to Christianity or by industrialisation. Raja Rao in his *KANTHAPURA* doesn't advocate a caste less society but makes a plea for proper treatment of lower castes. For Karanth the problem is one of poverty, of landlessness. For Shivashankar Pillai the solution to untouchability lies in protest against discrimination and use of violence to achieve equality. Jagannatha starts regularly going to the lands and meeting people. He wants to become close to the people. He personally checks the accounts and finds out that large amount

of pilferage has been taking place. Immediately he takes steps to stop the pilferage.

AWASTHE

Written in Kannada in 1978 *AWASTHE* (The Condition) was translated by Shanthinath Desai and edited by Anna Sujatha Mathai, in 1990. As socio-economic and moral degradation is the theme of *SAMSKARA*, socio-political degradation is the major theme of *AWASTHE* (1990). Anantha Murthy makes a shift in theme as well as in narrative technique i.e., modernistic. At the centre of the novel is Krishnappa Gowda, a sort of idealistic and quasi-religious politician who is the consciousness of the novel itself as it is in any of the psychological novels like Virginia Woolf's *MRS. DALLOWAY* or *THE WAVES*. Memory is the technique. The story of Krishnappa Gowda is revealed in the form of reveries and memories which come back to him as he is a paralytic. So Prof. Barucha says- "*AWASTHE* is more like an inner state of consciousness punctured with memories, wishfulfilments, fantasies, and dreams" (1). Although it is difficult to study such a novel into categorical sub-divisions like setting, theme, characters, plot-structure,, narrative technique and style, an attempt has been made.

The novel has no physically recognisable single space as such. There is the mention of Krishnappa Gowda's village. The details of the village are not properly mentioned. There is an unperceivable city scape - like that of Bangalore or Mysore. The prison where Krishnappa is locked and tortured for sometime is vividly recreated. As it is a psychological novel, the details of the external reality are described but not authenticated. A huge bungalow where Krishnappa Gowda spends his last days is also described along with the details of its interiors.

As the theme of *SAMSKARA* is socio-economic and moral decadence of the , older generation, of orthodox brahmins, represented by Praneshacharya, the theme of *AWASTHE* is the moral decadence of a democratic setup represented by the decadent life of the idealistic Krishnappa Gowda. As a boy he is a dreamer and as a youngman he is involved in the revolutionary activities. His adherence to the ideology of socialism on the line of Gandhian and Lohiaite economics slackens as he grows older and older in his career. He experiences the harsh reality of a feudal and dictatorial setup. In the garb of democracy, his idealism is crushed to pieces and though a chiselled politician he misses a chance of becoming CM. He tries to go away from the "dirty politics" and withdraw himself into the shell of his own bodily pleasures and pains of being a paralytic. The failure of idealism in politics is reflected through the realistic portrayal of his life year by year. One can compare the moral and spiritual defeat of Praneshacharya with the symptomatic withdrawal of Krishnappa Gowda. He is, like Praneshacharya, a fallen hero. What one likes about him is his fearless frankness, besides truthfulness and honesty.

Krishnappa Gowda is the central figure in *AWASTHE*. He is the consciousness of the novel. As a boy he is innocent but clever. Fatherless he is loved by his mother. Maheshwarayya sends him to school and infuses in him an awareness regarding the importance of education. As a youngman he is full of radical ideas. He studies Gandhi, Marx and other socialists. Although he does not involve in anti-

government activities he is arrested and imprisoned because of his association with a disguised revolutionary. He has got a religious and spiritual side also. He believes in the power of the Goddess Durga and hopes for providence. He often meets a Sanyasi, an 'unwordly' saint who finally turns into a serpent in the neck of the lingam - Lord Shiva. After the torture, in the prison cell of Warangal, his political career gains momentum. He is considered to be one of the important socialists. As a man he is not devoid of human weakness - especially weakness for women and wine. Anantha Murthy portrays him in myriad details. He becomes a symbol of decadent political setup of an older generation. He has an attack of paralysis. He crawls like a child on the floor at the end of the novel. In spite of his certain weakness, he is kind and humane. He is not grossly selfish like others.

Anantha Murthy looks into the emotions and ideas of his characters. His method of characterization is from inside of the characters. So the external details of physical appearance and gestures become less important in this finely written 'psychological' novel.

AWASTHE is not structured linearly like *SAMSKARA*. The novel begins with Krishnappa Gowda, the politician - lying in bed of a paralytic stroke and ends with his crawling on the floor. The whole story is narrated in terms of memories between two significant moments of the present. There are flashbacks and oscillation of movements between the past and present. Of this Barucha says:

"Significantly, the protagonist is a socialist politician who is (nonetheless), aware of some divine intervention in life, Krishnappa's moments of being are deeply interiorised not least because he is suffering from a paralytic stroke that leaves him more or less immobile. Thrust as he is in the stasis of his condition, both personal and political, he derives strength from his inner world, nourished by memories and sensations of his childhood in the village, and his affinity to the 'ecstatic poetry of Kabir and Allama.'" (2)

Krishnappa's connections with Annaji, Maheshwarayya, and his imprisonment and torture, his development as an important politician, his extra-marital relationship with Gouri and Lucina are compressed. The plot structure, although fragmented, comes close to that of any novel of the 'stream of consciousness' mode.

CONCLUSION

There is no denying the fact that Anantha Murthy has done Indian literature great by his novels *SAMSKARA*, *BHARATHIPURA*, *AWASTHE* and *Bhava*. Not numerically but by distinctive artistic talent he compelled the attention of critics world over. Writing as he did in the post-colonial context he rightly chose to interrogate the tradition in its decadent aspects. Not that he has any disrespect for Indian tradition. He has in fact immeasurable love and admiration for Indian tradition which includes its art. He had in fact said that Indian literature is no inferior to any of the literatures of the world. However he

cautions the whole of Indian tradition cannot be accepted in totality. So his novels interrogate such of those aspects of Indian tradition which have begun to subvert society. Therefore the relevance of Anantha Murthy's works to our times which witness division of society on the basis of caste, and faith is more urgent.

The novel *Samskara* describes the journey of Praneshacharya, who has internalised the tradition from acceptance of tradition to interrogating it. In dramatising his predicament the novelist has drawn attention to the blind observances of rituals and reading of scriptures without understanding their meaning. The consequences of such blind adherence are shown to be terrible. The entire Durvasapura is reduced to a graveyard for being very rigid in their attitudes and for being very literal in their reading of scriptures. This is the fate of many villages and many communities in India which don't see the deadwood in the tradition. In condemning one sinner who defied brahminhood the entire brahmin community sins itself. The Indian tradition has it that most actions are Karmic and that man's evil is transferred from his past life. So the brahmins of the agrahara instead of dismissing Naranappa's unbrahminical acts as consequences of his Karma, try to judge him a sinner and thus become no better than Naranappa himself. It is this partial understanding of tradition, that is ridiculed in the novel. The difference between the so called virtuous and immoral is not qualitative but quantitative. Naranappa has committed, fewer sins than others in Durvasapura who all seem to have the arishad Vargas. The central episode of Praneshacharya-Chandri sexual encounter suggests that not all sins are committed consciously. If adulterous relationships are to be condemned as sinful then the novel condemns Praneshacharya just as it does Naranappa. But we know it doesn't because a sensitive reader will realise that this episode has been created to indicate that Naranappa too might have yielded to a beautiful woman in a moment. But instead of forgetting it he perpetuates it. The novelist wants the reader to go beyond the social verdict on Naranappa and understand him properly.

It has been said above that in *SAMSKARA* the writer interrogates certain aspects of Indian tradition. Continuing in the same interrogatory vein the author questions the evil practice of untouchability in *Bharathipura*. This time the rebel is western educated and with his ideas of liberalism tries to fight for the deprived classes. Even since his arrival in Bharathipura he has been obsessed with Manjunatha who is worshipped by the caste Hindus, and who lords over Bhootharaya the god of lower castes. Since the untouchables are not allowed into the temple, Jagannatha prepares the untouchables for the temple entry. Every day he is found discussing the subject with some of his friends, and with the untouchables. Equally he is obsessed with the 'Saligrama' worshipped in his house and he wants to prove to the untouchables that it is no more than a stone. Ironically the 'Saligrama' episode turns him into a very harsh man, makes him harsh towards those he love. As for the temple entry is concerned things so happen that the others take over from him and he is no longer the central figure in the episode. It is paradoxical that the man who hates the 'Saligrama' and 'Manjunatha' is shown to be obsessed with them.

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