

Realism and Existentialism in U.R. Ananthamurthy's Short Stories

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Abstract

In Ananthamurthy's short stories we find Navya, Authencity, Desi-marga, immediate and rootedness, ethical authenticity of the self, 'Jeernagni', Native, insider concepts. Ananthamurthy is undoubtedly one of the main architects of the 'Navya' movement- the modernist phase-in Kannada Literature. None would contest the sharp intellectual dimensions that he gave the 'Navya' movement, which severely interrogated vague abstractions, sweeping generalizations and lofty and sentimental ideals, that individuals, communities, literary texts, spiritual and philosophical discourses and theories of aesthetics often tend to uphold as "Values" of life, and rigorously looked for 'authenticity' in individual social life. This search for 'authenticity' of the 'Navya' tradition has always been acknowledged by all, including the later generations of artists and activists who had several disagreements with it. One can have a glimpse of this quality in all his prose pieces, especially "Tradition and creativity", "The Search for an Identity", "Why Not Worship in the Nude?", "Gandhi's Triumph Over the Fear of Death", and the autobiographical-intellectual narrative, "Five Decades of my writing" where the classical, the marga, fuses with the local/indigenous, the desi, the rational finds its juxtaposition with the mystical/non-rational, and ideological/philosophical converses with the realistic and existentialistic in addition to that experiential.

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Introduction

U.R. Ananthamurthy is one of the pioneer short story writers of Kannada as well as Dravidian Literature. Ananthamurthy is undoubtedly one of the main architects of the 'Navya' movement- the modernist phase-in Kannada Literature. None would contest the sharp intellectual dimensions that he gave the 'Navya' movement, which severely interrogated vague abstractions, sweeping generalizations and lofty and sentimental ideals, that individuals, communities, literary texts, spiritual and philosophical discourses and theories of aesthetics often tend to uphold as "values" of life, and rigorously looked for 'authenticity' in individual social life. This search for 'authenticity' of the 'Navya' tradition has always been acknowledged by all, including the later generations of artists and activists who had several disagreements with it. One can have a glimpse of this quality in all his prose pieces, especially "Tradition and creativity", "The Search for an Identity", "Why Not Worship in the Nude?", "Gandhi's Triumph Over the Fear of Death", and the

autobiographical-intellectual narrative, "Five Decades of my writing" where the classical, the marga, fuses with the local/indigenous, the desi, the rational finds its juxtaposition with the mystical/non-rational, and ideological/philosophical converses with the realistic and existentialistic in addition to that experiential.

Why because Ananthamurthy's short stories bring one face to face with almost all the major formations, debates and counter-debates that have shaped, reshaped and continue to reconfigure India. Only a few writers have been able to respond to the evolving consciousness of India as a society and a culture with the intense kind of "immediate and rootedness" with which Ananthamurthy, as a creative writer and thinker, has done. He has been able to achieve "immediacy and rootedness" without ever resorting to a simplistic and reductionist ideological position upholding a singular view of Indian society. Ananthamurthy, because of his rootedness and opposition, is, both in terms of knowledge and experience, a critical insider constantly moving from one

state of being to another. The shift in his position is facilitated by his tremendous ability to internalize antithetical positions and to accommodate contrary views without ever compromising the value of any of them. His above mentioned short stories are great pieces of self-reflexive writing truly enhancing the texture and the mature vision of the late works of a writer like Ananthamurthy and providing a magnificent contrast to the form and content of the early works. His late works are also a contemplation of the nature of creativity itself during times that have no regard for certain fundamental values of a genuinely socialist conception of life and society. And they could be read as negotiations and confrontations of individuals struggling for an "ethical authenticity of the self" by correlating personal dilemmas with social, political and cultural conflicts. If the former could be regarded as a 'metaphysical' dilemma, the latter suggests itself as problems of history posed by the contradictions of a society in transition. Consequently, individual/personal dimensions are inextricably bound to the historical situation. In other words there no resolution to a historical dilemma without the ethical action of the individuals. But what makes the whole dialectic very complex-and at times even tragic-is the fact that no ethical action is possible for the individual independent of the community, and outside the historical context which no single individual can alter wholly on one's own.

The profound understanding of the complexity of a diverse society like India has always helped his maintain ambivalence in his writings-both creative and intellectual. The responses to Ananthamurthy have always been extreme and the writer has never been able to avoid getting into controversies. Readers and critics have labeled him in various ways. The extreme responses to a writer like Ananthamurthy are because of the subtle nuances like caste, tradition and modernity. The sophisticated perspectives of the writer have strongly displaced people with a single ideology who do not see in his works a straightforward and direct answer and resolution to socio-cultural crises. Since Ananthamurthy refuses to believe that great social and cultural cries can be solved in the immediate present and that revolutions can take overnight to change societies and cultures, he does not give ideological remedies or solutions to the crises he deals with in his short stories. As a writer Ananthamurthy only carefully observes the complex processes of social of social and cultural transformation. Thus, there a thematic de-centering in his works that does not accommodate any single interpretation. This quality of his writings is a blemish for some, while for those fascinated by the complexity of the creative process it is a great virtue. These creative aspect Ananthamurthy's short stories explain his importance in our context, ever for those who have major disagreements with him. In an important way he has been a major living force in our cultural context and custom.

Generally, some of his short stories 'Clip Joint', 'Suryana Kudure' (translated as "Stallion of the Sun"), 'Jaratkaru', 'Akkaya', and 'Bete Bale Mathu Othiketha' ("Hunt Bangle and Chameleon") are the extra-ordinary in 'metaphoric' style. The metaphor of 'Jeernagni' (The digestive fire) applies to him as much as it does to the language he writes in, Kannada, when he argues that the greatness of his language comes from this quality of Jeernagni. The writer uses the front yard and backyard metaphorically for the concepts of marga and desi, the former standing for the high classical mode, represented by Sanskrit once, and the latter for the indigenous, native and local traditions in literature and culture. The meeting of the two stands for the inter-textuality in India's literary and

cultural heritage. Because, "we belong to a plurality of cultures and a single civilization or the characters of Ananthamurthy's other story "Ruth and Rasool" dealing with the same theme. "Suryana Kudure", "Jaratkaru", "Akkaya", "Bete Bale Mathu Othiketha" are works that fully come to terms with all the discourses of the last two decades-cultural, political and economic. Ananthamurthy does not shy away from any uncomfortable position. In fact his works fully confront the power of the varied discourses, and out of this confrontation emerges the vision of these late works of the writer. Only a very sensitive reader would grasp the truth that these works of Ananthamurthy posit their vision only after a through engagement with all the other ideological positions of the times. At a very serious intellectual level "Jaratkaru", "Akkaya", and "Bete Bale Mathu Othikeths" are works that challenge theoretical constructs like Post-colonialism, post-modernism that dismiss local/native forms of expression. Each of these stories offers an opposition to academic theoretical positions that arrogate to themselves the supreme power to validate or negate alternative creative and intellectual sources.

Here, Ananthamurthy contests the structures of the modern West-oriented academia that grants itself the quality of omniscience while discoursing on other cultures and forms of knowledge. It is the epistemological violence of the western world, pathetically mimicked by the deracinated native intellectual, that these works mock at- with confidence, conviction, and, most amazingly, a high degree of self-reflexivity. It is not only the "other"- the high-breed intellectual of the western academia-who is ridiculed, but also the hapless "native" academic, the native "informant" to the western academia. A rootless "insider" is also critiqued in these short stories. But it in "Jaratkaru" that Ananthamurthy fearlessly turns against his own 'Navya' tradition, and its arrogance of granting the modern mind the sensibility and the power to expose the hollowness of "other" and the supreme ability to discover the "truth" oneself. In "Akkaya" and "Jaratkaru" Ananthamurthy also shapes a tender, benevolent and mellow feminine spirit that quietens the ego of an aggressive, pompous masculine self.

I take to discuss the Themes and Techniques of Current Trends in Dravidian Short Stories. Especially, I have taken "Clip Joint", "Stallion of the Sun" and "Akkaya". The story, "Clip Joint", brings out the inadequate of both Indian tradition and western modernity. However, the dissatisfactions of Stewart, who represents the West, are emblematic of a quest that is superior to that of Keshav. He is pragmatic and devoid of self-pity, and therefore, commands greater admiration than Keshav. While Stewart bemoans a lack of higher purpose in the materiality of West, Keshav's anguish is the product of unfulfilled basic physical needs. The repression of sexuality is again shown to be at the root of the anomie in Keshav. Keshav also debunks the superiority of the Indian spiritual tradition by exposing the hypocrisy in the Indian way of life. The equation of Subbanna uncle's spiritual quest with Keshav's instinctual seeking places Indian spirituality in an ironic perspective. The term 'Clip Joint' stands not merely for the club, dehumanized by its cross commercialism, but of the human condition. Keshav's attempt at an initiation into the mysteries of sex has a banal ending. His sense of futility of his sexual pursuit is equated with the religious quest of his father and Subbanna uncle. Inversely, the narrative dissolves the aura around such religious quests. "...Did this nothingness haunt father too, engaged as he was always in worship and meditation? I must escape from this clip joint where you get a

kiss when you no longer want it, and you know that the sole purpose of that kiss is to rob you more"(83). Clip Joint symbolizes the predicament in which Keshav and his likes situate themselves. The sense of his familial duties is such a burden that he feels guilty of squandering money in a futile seeking. He thinks that the amount he wasted would have satisfied the needs of his family for two months. Keshav is caught between contrary pulls; Indian tradition demands of him to shoulder the familial responsibility while his exposure to modernity kindles in him a desire for the fulfillment of his individuality.

In addition to that Ananthamurthy works out this predicament in a different manner through Keshav in "Clip Joint" by drawing attention to the state of an Indian seeking authenticity in England, in every sense an alien land. The intensity of "Clip Joint" dealing with the experience of 'alierness' is remarkably different from the facile works written in English by Indian authors about the so-called "diasporic" experience. The artificial construct of 'Diaspora' of comfortably placed middle class Indians doing very well on foreign lands is so much to the soul searching struggle of individuals like Keshav. Thus, Ananthamurthy portrays the impact of modernity on a traditional society resulting in the emergence of individualism, which leads to a conflict between the individual and the society to get reality and existence in him.

In the story "Stallion of the Sun", Ananthamurthy uses Transcendence forms the central concern of the story which presents the encounter between apparently innocent village priest, Venkata and western educated, rationalist narrator Ananthu, who thinks of the former as the embodiment of the village idiocy. In the dialects of the narrative Venkata is juxtaposed and evaluated against Ananthu who, for all his western education and rationality, suffers the angst of reality and existence. Ananthu represents the audacity of western civilization, when he tries to asses Venkata, "Without destroying the likes of this Venkata there would no progress, no electricity, no river, no dams, no penicillin, no pride, no honor, no joy of sex, no winning of a woman, no climax, no flying, no joy of life, no memory, no ecstasy, no bliss" (Stallion of the Sun-161). Venkata appears to Ananthu not only as negation of modernity and its values, but of life itself. The latter's ideas of life are governed by his modern education, which creates a rapture between his true cultural self and his intellect. It is the schizophrenia of modern civilization, which makes it a compulsion to seek knowledge and interpret life. Ananthu's interior monologue reflects his dependence on venkata for sources of creativity.

"I feel I am drying up. I don't fancy anything. A vague apprehension troubles me. Ideas for writing don't come to me anything..... ?" (Omnibus p.156).

As the narrator undergoes intellectual anguish, venkata in the reality and existence of life and nature around him reacts, "I smell Kedige flowers". The narrator lives in a world of abstractions divorced from the sensuous experience the natural world, which is always open to Venkata. His western education prevents him from appreciating the full meanings of Venkatas's words or the strength of his personality. As the enter a house of the sick man Sheshappa, Ananthu muses, Look at this Venkata, he is a philosopher too. If I try to answer him, I'll have to use the words and phrases in English, or else, equivalent expressions unfamiliar to him..... (Omnibus p.166). The episode of the oil bath is treated like a magical/religious ritual performed by Venkata on Ananthu to lead him to his own level of consciousness. Venkatas incantation comes to close its close with the words, "All that

remains is the Stallion of the Sun.... You are the Stallion.....You are the Sun" (Omnibus p.176). The next morning unfolds the two contrasting and climatic moments of the story. The first is the rebellious act of Subba, the son of Venkata, cutting down the Parijatha tree and the garden which stands for the family's cherished values of the nature and harmony. The second incident of the day forms the climactic moment of the story. Ananthu had expected Venkata to be devastated by the ruthless acts of his son. But he is surprised to see his friend in his bandy-legged posture, naked except for a loincloth, steadily gazing at a grasshopper near the fence. In the story "Stallion of the Sun", Subba represents the aspirations of modernity; he demands money from his father for establishing a floor mill, a symbol of modernity. His thwarted ambition leads him to defy his father and turn violent. His capacity to defiance is described as "the very source of and vital energy for the creation of nuclear weapons and poison gas" (Stallion 181). Representation of science through nuclear weapons and poison gas amounts an implicit criticism of modern science as a force that rests on the crystallization of violence.

For a moment, watching my friend, Simpleton Venkata, looking fascinatedly at his humpbacked, 'bent-legged', Stallion of the Sun! I said (Omnibus p.183). The ending of the story with repetition of the words 'Stallion of the Sun' by Venkata and the narrator has its symbolic connotation. It connotes the extinction of dualities between Venkata and narrator, the Stallion and the narrator, the perceiver and the perceived. It is a moment of epiphany for Ananthu, the end of the existentialist angst he suffer from. It is symbolizes him transcending his egocentric predicament to realize the cosmic dimension of his being. The Stallion of the Sun is a vehicle that transports him from his fragmented being to cosmic consciousness. Ananthu's humanist concern to help his friend Venkata becomes redundant in the situation. He had hoped to become an agent of transformation in the life of Venkata. But, on the contrary, he is relieved of his existential angst by means of a cosmic communion through the agency of the priest Venkata, who for all his simplicity of appearance lives a life beyond the dualities of the self and other.¹ The ending of the story indicates the author's predilection for resolving the ambivalence in the story, through the rediscovery of a centre in the Indian tradition.

In the story "Akkayya", transcendence is symbolized in the portrait of the widow Akkayya, drawn by her brother Srinivasa. Akkayya, who would be considered underdeveloped according to the standards of western psychology, is portrayed as an angel with wings, flying towards the sky. In The story "Akkayya", the critique of the modernity emanates from certain aspects of postmodern thought. The story interrogates the absolutist and universalistic notions of truth emerging from European Enlightenment more thoroughly than any other fictional work by Ananthamurthy. The narrator, in the course of the story "Akkayya", crosses over from his modernist position of certainty to the position of ambivalence which is described by Bauman as a postmodernist characteristic. In a typical postmodernist fashion, the story of the Brahmin woman Akkayya is told twice within the story "Akkayya" and refers back to another story written by Ananthamurthy during the modernist phase under the title "Prastha" ("Nuptials"). In his earlier story, a Brahmin woman becomes the butt of ridicule evoking the reader's disgust at the absurd Brahminical customs. The same woman is redeemed and glorified in her fictional reincarnation as Akkayya. The story "Akkayya"

referring back to this earlier story curiously reminds us of Bauman's call for retelling stories....there is an unworried awareness that there are many stories that need to be told over again, each time losing something to the past versions. There is also a new determination:

These words of Bauman are relevant to a discussion of the story "Akkayya" in more than one way. Apart from suggesting the plurality of narratives, Bauman interrogates the Darwinian notions of fitness and survival, of social Darwinism, and such interrogation is central to the concerns of Ananthamurthy in "Akkayya". The past attitudes of Srinivasa and the narrator are juxtaposed with their present understanding of the experiences and personality of Akkayya. In the past, Srinivasa was a bitter critic of the Indian tradition for he thought that it stifled the personality of the individual; he was full of revolutionary fervor to change the Indian reality and existence.

Srinivasa's bitter was directed at his elders who had got her married as a child to an unknown man and deprived her of any opportunity for personal fulfillment.....

In Akkayya's transcendental imagination the bitter fact of untouchability does not exist, or is glossed over; a Brahmin and an untouchable in the present day are described to have been brothers their previous birth. The impact of such philosophical suggestions as the oneness of all creation and of all human beings can be uncertain. A pertinent question would be whether such stories drive home the irrelevance of the caste system, or do they amount to an obfuscation of the Indian social reality and existence of untouchability.

To conclude, as a creative writer, Ananthamurthy shows a departure from his earlier position of examining Indian traditions from the perspectives derived from western knowledge systems. In these three short stories, Ananthamurthy lets flower a new consciousness of the creative process that is, at the same time, a full answer to the monstrosity of a brutalizing, dehumanizing technological world driven by its own savage power that has no respect for the meek and the humble. The writers creative genius leads on towards the future reassuring us all the time that no brutal power can vanquish us totally, so long as we, as individuals and communities, hold on to our images and symbols to prove the concepts of Realism and Existentialism in these three short stories. Thus, we prove the current trends in Dravidian short stories' themes and techniques in Ananthamurthy's Short Stories "Clip Joint", "Stallion of the Sun" and "Akkayya" to get the picture of 'Realism and Existentialism'.

Conclusion

To conclude, as a creative writer, Ananthamurthy shows a departure from his earlier position of examining Indian traditions from the perspectives derived from western knowledge systems. In these three short stories, Ananthamurthy lets flower a new consciousness of the creative process that is, at the same time, a full answer to the monstrosity of a brutalizing, dehumanizing technological world driven by its own savage power that has no respect for the meek and the humble. The writers creative genius leads on towards the future reassuring us all the time that no brutal power can vanquish us totally, so long as we, as individuals and communities, hold on to our images and symbols to prove the concepts of Realism and Existentialism in these three short stories. Thus, we prove the current trends in Dravidian short stories' themes and techniques in Ananthamurthy's Short Stories "Clip Joint", "Stallion of the Sun" and "Akkayya" to get the picture of 'Realism and Existentialism'

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