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Challenging Social and Cultural Mores: Recalcitrant Heroes in the Works of U.R. Ananthamurthy

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ABSTRACT

Brahminism remains a pervasive force in the works of U.R. Ananthamurthy. The places where Brahminism is strong remain undeveloped with Brahmins becoming a part of unproductive society. Ananthamurthy's works show that Brahmins remain a backward and unproductive society because of orthodoxy. Ananthamurthy's heroes rebel against the oppressive system and try to justify their existence by rebelling against the customs. Incidentally all the heroes are Brahmins who know their society intimately, but they are liberal, open-minded and modern individuals who understand that if the Brahmins have to prosper in the modern world then they have to shun their attitude and fit into the modern economic system. The current paper studies different works of U.R. Ananthamurthy and shows how his heroes develop recalcitrance while trying to wake up their society to the evils that emanate from their anachronic customs and professions.

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Introduction

Indian fiction, since the time of Prem Chand, has been a vehicle for social reforms. Indian novelists and story tellers have toiled hard to bring a change in Indian mind that is stagnated in the reverie of India's glorious past. So the most important job of the Indian novelist has been to displace the Indian masses from their past and place them in present where they get a feelings the problems persisting in the Indian society in the present. U. R. Ananthamurthy is one of the most important writers of post-independence India who has regularly struck on the cord which binds the Indian mind with the glorious past. His writing addresses the issues which plague the contemporary Indian society.

The current paper focuses on the heroes in the novels and short stories of U.R. Ananthamurthy. The heroes in Ananthamurthy's works are all recalcitrant who work against the evils of the society and try to change the society by their own individual actions. The heroes are the men who stand tall among the ritualistic, orthodox and backward societies where people still depend on anachronic professions to sustain their lives. U. R. Ananthamurthy's works are sincere efforts to change the society on his own. He himself admits that the moment he begins "to talk to a very orthodox, traditional man or woman in our culture, I find myself taking an antagonistic position, a position that is very critical of our traditional notions" (Ananthamurthy, Indian Culture 374). His heroes endorse his point of view and become rebellious individuals who not only revolt against their society and caste, but also against their families. The writer is critical of the role of these institutions in shaping the minds of the people of India. He sincerely believes that the evils like casteism, untouchability and unproductivity still persist in India because of the role of all these institutions and their role in glorifying the Indian culture:

We are too easily influenced by our culture not merely because of its attraction; it is also because of the importance given to our teachers and our elders in our social set-up. That the

Indian youth remains immature until his father dies, is often true. Our personalities do not take a definite character because of the way we are brought up. (Ananthamurthy, Fragmented 306) So the first job of the hero in Ananthamurthy is to rebel against these institutions because "meaningful dialogues are made difficult by our culture" (Ananthamurthy, Fragmented 306). The heroes in Ananthamurthy's writings rebel against these institutions because these institutions condition the human beings in seeing the subversions as normalised. In other words, these institutions train the people in treating the oppressive hegemonic structures and customs as normal. A hero becomes hero in Ananthamurthy by swimming against the tide; the first step is to gain freedom from the family, by defying the customs of the families:

Who knows what would have become of me, if I too had remained rotting in this village? Because I dared to defy my father and reject the family's traditions, I was able to grow and become what I am today. (Stallion of the Sun 160)

In the writings of Ananthamurthy, heroes cultivate heroism only after cutting themselves from roots. The villages where Brahminism remains strong do not allow the individuals to cultivate an alternative philosophy in contradiction to the dominant one. The people who stay in villages do not have exposure to the alternate points of view and remain slugged in the rituals and traditions without questioning their validity. That is why heroes of Ananthamurthy have to leave the village, defy the family and take the risk of getting polluted in the alien environment of the cities. The heroes often find their intellectual refuge in the cities, the cosmopolitan centres where the ideas related to caste and pollution have diluted or in Europe where the heroes are fed on the philosophies of thinkers like Marx and Hegel. For them there is no liberation while living in the villages:

I won't hear any of it. In my view, this village is like a curse. I want to live. But not here. Sharada too shouldn't stay here. I don't want a marriage which insists on her staying here.

This village and the familiar house here may be dear to you like your own life. For me this place is my graveyard. (Ananthamurthy, *The Question* 64)

Most of the writings of Ananthamurthy concentrate on the Brahmins and their related customs. The heroes are also Brahmins who stand up against the oppressive rituals of their society. The first issue tackled in the writings of the writer is that of unproductive society. Most of the Brahmins constitute an unproductive society where the people still indulge in their outdated professions and resist modern ways of earning the living. Brahmins are contented with their “endless funeral cakes and funeral porridge” (*Samskara* 36). Naranappa, the anti-hero figure in the novel is highly critical of these unproductive Brahmins. He is antagonized by the Brahmins because they did not get any “calls for any meal or banquet” (*Samskara* 8). Naranappa is an extreme revolutionary who breaks all the taboos of the Brahmin society to show his disapproval of ways of the Brahmins.

The opposition to the modern professions is so great that anybody who thinks of joining it or joins it is excommunicated from the society. Naranappa not only detests the ways of the Brahmins, but also actively encourages the youth of the *agrahara* to join the modern professions. He encourages the youth to start a drama troupe considered a sin in orthodox Brahmin families. Naranappa becomes an outcaste due to his acts for encouraging the Brahmin youth to join modern professions:

Who induced Garuda's son to run away from home and join the army? Naranappa, who else? Praneshacharya had taught the boy the vedic scriptures, but what mattered finally was only Naranappa's word. (*Samskara* 10)

The society is changing, through Naranappa, Ananthamurthy introduces young man who is not satisfied with ritual meals only and do not want to remain confined in their secluded world to maintain their Brahminical purity, but the older generation is not ready to change themselves. For them, the youth who want to join the modern professions are under the “influence of inauspicious stars” (Stallion, 158). Naranappa knows that the society that is lying stagnant from many decades cannot change by his efforts only, so he wants to awake Praneshacharya to the corruption of the Brahmins. Ironically, what he fails to do in his lifetime is achieved by his death.

In his short story, “Stallion of the Sun” Ananthamurthy introduces a character Venkatakrishna Joysa, who is content to live an impoverished life instead of trying a modern profession. Ananthamurthy is agitated at the fatalism of Venkatakrishna and writes:

I began to feel that, without destroying the likes of this Venkata, there would be no progress, no electricity, no river dams, no penicillin, no pride, no honour, no joy of sex, no winning a woman, no climax, no flying, no joy of life, no memory, no ecstasy, no bliss. (146)

The story is narrated in first person and the views in the story are not filtered through somebody else. Ananthamurthy's comments makes clear that in modern society there is no place for unproductive people like Venkata.

The social hierarchy of the past is on the verge of becoming obsolete. In the past, Brahmins were on the top of social ladder and their position was unquestionable and was by the virtue of their birth. In those times “functions and social roles traditionally assigned to the Brahmins were teaching and studying, propitiating and sacrificing and giving and accepting

of alms” (Sinha 45). In the past, learning was concentrated in the hands of Brahmins only, so their control over the social structure was absolute where they claimed alms not only for teaching, but also for the things in which they were not involved at all:

Priests claimed that victory was granted through their intercession; soldiers said it was won by their swords. The parties clashed; both claimed the spoils' and they fought for precedence in long fierce wars whose history is lost and of which all we know is that the Brahmanas won. (Porter 26-27)

From the above quotation, it is clear that the Brahmins in the past as priestly class were parasites who used to take credit for the works that were not done by them. In addition to that they earn handsomely by interceding on the behalf of mortals with the immortal world, a theme so elegantly pursued by Premchand in his novel *Godan*. But the times have changed now and the Brahmins are no longer able to do the role of intermediaries who can assist the people in achieving supra existence (*moksha*). They did the productive work of teaching, but only a few people had the access to their services, now with the universalization of education teaching has not remained their domain only.

In the present age, all these occupations have become non-existent. Now the wars are not won by incantation, but by weapons and valour. With the advent of many religions doubts have been raised about the necessity of having Brahmins as intermediaries. So according to Ananthamurthy the Brahmins who are clinging to their outdated professions are the obstacles in the development of the society and country. In the modern economic system, all the chains are linked to one another. So when Brahmins fail to change themselves and fail to do some productive things, the chain becomes sluggish and the development of the society becomes farce because the Brahmins are not a part of it.

The Brahmins refuse to become the part of modern professions, so they remain impoverished and this have a dehumanizing impact on the people. Naranappa exposes that the males become sinners who know every kind of sin “sins of gluttony, sins of avarice and love of gold” (*Samskara* 24). The impact on women is also severe. They lose all their feminine charms and become “frigid” (Ananthamurthy, *The Question* 49) and they are “short, plump and round” (*Samskara* 31) with their “cheek sunken breast withered, mouths stinking of lentil soup” (*Samskara* 36).

On the other hand, “low caste” (*Samskara* 5) women like Chandri and Belli are epitomes of beauty. In “The Question,” Brahmin girl Sharda is described as a “beautiful marble tomb” (54), while low caste Lacchi is “like camphor burning on water” (54). The use of word “tomb” clearly signifies the death of emotions and feelings in Brahmin women, on the other hand “burning” shows the liveliness of low caste women. There is little doubt that Ananthamurthy finds low caste women beautiful because they work hard while Brahmin wives lead an idle life style. His heroes also find fulfillment in the company of low caste women.

The heroes in Ananthamurthy's writing detest the repression of feminine charms by the women. They admire the women who look beautiful and are aware of their feminine charms and can use them to entice men. The independence of the girls where they can voice their like and dislike freely lacks in the Brahmin society, on the other hand low caste women are able to express their desires freely. Chandri and Belli in *Samskara*, Lacchi in “The Question” and Kaveri in

Bharathipura are all sensuous females who believe in fulfilling carnal desires while the Brahmin females are taught to repress theirs and are conditioned to believe that sexual pleasure is an “unmitigated disaster” (The Question 53.) In “Clip Joint”, this is what Keshav tells Stewart after seeing the British girls:

But our girls!- Their timidity, their coyness, their drawing the sari end over their breasts! – what a show! Look at the girls here, going about with their breasts protruding, proclaiming their allure! So straightforward and fearless! For our girls, from middle-class families, the anatomy is something to be concealed like a secret weapon. (107)

In the places where Brahminism is strong, tasting the forbidden fruit means end of the life. In “The Question” Sharda’s sister is forced to commit suicide because of her pregnancy. On the other hand, heroes in all the novels and the stories represent the other point of view and sexual experience is an important part of development of their personalities. Naranappa and Sripati in *Samskara*, and Jaggannath in *Bharathipura* do not believe in abstemious life styles and have no inhibitions in fulfilling carnal desires even with prostitutes. Even Ranga in “The Question” is a libertine who has liberal views about sex. He is bewildered at Sharda’s sister’s suicide:

Tell me, Sharda, why didn’t you take somebody’s help and arrange for an abortion? That would have been better than her dying. One of my father’s sisters got it done, it seems what we are all doing under the thin cover of respectability is to turn our faces away from reality. (53)

It is clear from Ranga’s attitude that he does not consider it a sin to fulfill carnal desires; rather the repression is a sin. Moreover, there is no need to lose one’s life for the problem which can be solved by a small help from the doctor. According to him this kind of repression is not acceptable. These attitudes have to be done away with because they have become outdated:

Things should die, and be destroyed once their usefulness was past. Such an order would be good, beautiful. Mere survival with one hanging on to life was evil. (The Question 66)

Ananthamurthy’s writings may be termed as regional because he writes about his community in Kannada, but the problems he raises exist in whole of India. One of the main themes of his writings has been the issue of untouchability. He shows great detestation for untouchability:

If you ask me what is the worst of the Indian civilization, I would say it is untouchability. I can understand slavery- a slave can fight back- but untouchability gets internalized. The victim gradually begins to feel he is untouchable. (Ananthamurthy, Introduction XI)

In India, the most important critique of untouchability came from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who introduced the concept of “graded inequality” (Ambedkar 40) and discussed that the sanction behind untouchability is that of religious nature that is why, the diabolic system in itself become sacred and is difficult to overthrow. Moreover, graded inequality does not allow the other oppresses classes to get united and overthrow the oppressive and dehumanizing juggernaut.

Ananthamurthy realizes this and knows that the change has to come from within. That is why the heroes in his writings are Brahmins. He realizes that if an outsider questions the rituals and caste system practised by the Brahmins, then the person will be isolated and his protest will lose strength and will ultimately die. The heroes are all recalcitrant and reprobates (from Brahmin point of view) who challenge the dominant oppressive structure

and try to create a new social order devoid of such dehumanizing practices.

His heroes are placed in their respective societies where they try to authenticate their existence (Ananthamurthy, Why not Worship in Nude? 324). Their most important endeavor is to challenge the systems that have been normalized over the centuries. There are so many people who have tried to obliterate the caste system and untouchability by creating an understanding. For example Narayan Guru wrote:

When both the Brahmin and pariah are born of same species what difference is there between the two? In ancient times, Muni Parasara was born of a pariah mother. The muni who wrote the vedas (Vyasa, who also wrote Mahabharata) was born of a fisher woman. (Lakshman 578)

Narayan Guru’s stand is reconciliatory, but Ananthamurthy’s heroes take a more confrontationist and radical stand. For them social order can be changed only by confrontation. Naranappa tells the Brahmins in *Samskara*: “Your texts and rites don’t work anymore. The congress Party is coming to power, you’ll have to open up the temples to all outcastes” (21), while Jaggannath is ready to challenge even the sacred, the sanctity of Lord Manjunatha to change the prevalent social order.

Similarly, his heroes are crusaders against the useless rituals. He stresses that things have to change with change in times. Anything that fails to do so becomes outdated. Brahminism in Ananthamurthy’s writings is encumbered by rituals which have become irrelevant in modern times. For example, Jaggannath detests the concept of pollution in strictly Brahminical sense. The concept of pollution is so complex that it is almost impossible to follow in modern times. This pollution can occur when a *shudra* comes too close, and by people touching a widow in her madi clothes (Mouni 97). With the emergence of modern transport system one cannot escape getting touched by other people. *Samskara* is woven around the concept of pollution, and Naranappa defies these laws by eating the food cooked by Chandri, a low caste; by eating fish and drinking liquor. This is done by Naranappa to prove that the beliefs carried by people regarding pollution are false:

The Brahmin who consumes intoxicants will be born as an insect, an unclean bird or as a destructive animal. And a Brahman who neglects the duties assigned to his caste may look forward to rebirth as an evil spirit that lives on what other vomit. On the other hand, the Brahman alone can hope from deliverance from Karma and the eternal round of rebirths if he be faithful to his duties, for he alone has the true knowledge which is the basis of deliverance, realization that the atman (individual soul) is identical with Brahman (world-soul). (Woodburne 527)

All the austerities and rituals were meant to purify human beings so that they may get ready for the stage i.e. moksha. But Ananthamurthy’s heroes reject the idea. The best example is presented in *Samskara* where Praneshacharya wants to achieve moksha by becoming “good.” But ultimately he understands the crux of religion and realizes that goodness is not the only way of achieving moksha. The method of achieving that ultimate goal should complement the nature of human being. Praneshacharya, too, realizes:

Till I touched Chandri, I too was a shell, counter to His will. Just as naturally as the body’s desires reach out to me, not leaving me even when I think I left them, why shouldn’t God come to me, unwilling by me? (*Samskara* 82-83)

The need for sexual fulfillment is accentuated by the fact that Praneshacharya tastes sexual pleasure while coming from the temple of celibate monkey God Maruti. Even the celibate God does not help him in preserving his celibacy shows that even God does not approve of his abnegating, unnatural behaviour.

Moreover, once Praneshacharya starts moving towards self-realization, a journey towards becoming a real Ananthamurthy hero, he realizes that goodness is not the only path that leads to God. He remembers the argument of a Smarta pundit:

Your idea that only men of 'goodness' can reach salvation, isn't that only a form of hopelessness? Doesn't it mean the disappointment of a human hope, desiring a thing and not getting it? (*Samskara* 76)

All the knowledge of scriptures was lying coded in Praneshacharya's mind but he could not decode it, because his mind was under too much pressure to preserve his unnatural life style: a life of abnegation. But once he enjoys sexual pleasure with Chandri, his mind becomes active, all the shells of artificiality are shorn away and all the riddles of scriptures are unknotted:

It is hard to know the inner workings of dharma. An arch-sinner, an outcaste, reaches salvation and paradise by merely uttering the name of Narayana with his dying breath... The quicker way of salvation was through conflict. For such as us, wearing away our Karma like a log of sandalwood by daily worship and ritual, it takes life after life to work out salvation. (*Samskara* 48-49)

Like all other heroes of Ananthamurthy, Praneshacharya too starts disregarding the rituals and the concept of pollution first unconsciously and then consciously. Ananthamurthy believes that rituals come in the way of realization of God. In his essay "Tradition and Creativity" he quotes Basava:

If you want to get to God, you have to develop a certain relationship with him based on a sense of immediacy, a relationship that is direct and spontaneous; but all rituals come in the way of such a realization of God. (349)

It is clear that the writer does not want people to live complicated lives, obfuscated by rituals which have lost relevance in the present day world. Some people have objected to the portrayal of Brahmins in the novels of Ananthamurthy, but whatever the issues are addressed to by the novelist are relevant. The heroes in the story are not against Brahminism, but against oppression which sucks the life blood out of individuals, and makes them slave to past. The heroes in the novels and stories take a stand that is pro-development and anti-tradition.

The other important tradition that is tackled by the writer is that of the segregation of widows. Shaven widows appear in most of his stories and novel. Widowhood for these women does not mean at personal and social level only, but also at the existential level also. The widows are treated as "Ill Omen" by the people and are made to believe that their husbands have died because of them. The widows in the society are regarded as "inauspicious sufferers for the misdeeds of previous existences" (Stevenson 59). Ananthamurthy shows that this kind of attitude, of blaming the past or sins of an individual for the tragedies is not good. The theme is treated in *Samskara* where the Brahmins live in a stagnated society. Praneshacharya is a "Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning," but he fails to realize that the deaths are occurring in the *agrahara* due to plague. On the other hand Manjappa, the head men of less orthodox Brahmin clan is quick

to understand that the dead people are all showing the symptoms of plague. The Brahmins in the *agrahara* die not of some divine calamity, but of a disease and a little worldly knowledge would have saved the precious lives of the people.

Ananthamurthy in his writings advocates that widows should be allowed to remarry for their brighter future, but at the same time makes it clear that the orthodox society does not allow it. In the novel *Bharathipura*, a character named Puranik, a rich land lord has to remain confined in his house because he has married a widow. He has been disowned by the society, but Jaggannath, the hero, does not feel any inhibitions in mixing with Puranik. Through him Ananthamurthy makes clear that the widow remarriages should take place very often.

The widows are not allowed the pleasures of life, they have to live on a meagre meal and have to destroy their beauty by shaving their heads. In other words, the widows have no right to look beautiful or to eat nutritious and tasty food; rather they have to live an austere and dull life punctuated by hardships. But this does not affect the psyche of the widows only, but also of the people who live with them. The problem is tackled by Ananthamurthy in his short story "Jaratkharu" where the widowed mother of the hero has to observe the severe austerities of widowhood:

When he was a child, the only time he felt his mother to be a woman was when she remained outside the main part of the house during her monthly periods. In the ten years since she stopped getting her periods, she grew to reject her ardent, but silently wilting fervor, at making God an actuality for her son through rigorous austerities of her widowhood. (165)

The complexity of such a self-starving and self-abnegating life is rejected by her son. The impact of such a life is evident on the son who becomes a bohemian to compensate for the hardships of his mother. Even his writings seem to suggest that life should be lived like hedonists:

Her son... didn't show affection to anyone, who ate forbidden food and drank forbidden drinks in the company of prostitutes, seemed to her a pitiable child that had lost his way to sainthood. (165)

The rejection of the austere life style by the son shows that he has been deeply affected by the hard life of his mother. The choice of visiting the prostitutes instead of getting married shows the psychological fear of the son that his wife will have to live the same kind of life in case he dies.

To conclude, U.R. Ananthamurthy's fiction presents a radical and confrontational ideal through the heroes. His fiction shows that if Indian society has to move further than the Indian people have to get rid of the rituals and traditions that are outdated. Indians have to build a society where a human being is known by his work and not by his birth. The societies steeped in tradition cannot move forward. The human beings should have liberal attitude towards life and precious moments of the life should not be wasted for the expectation of getting pleasure in the after-life. The human beings should live in the present only because it is the only truth human beings are sure of.

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