

Negotiating Tradition and Change: Thematic Explorations in the Fiction of U. R. Ananthamurthy

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Abstract

In contemporary Indian Literature, the work of U. R. Ananthamurthy on theme of tradition and modernity, caste, religion, politics and moral values, have made him a significant literary figure. U. R. Ananthamurthy was renowned writer belonging to the Kannada Navya movement, who transformed Indian Literature into a new and interesting form, which questioned the tension between the cultural practices of one's ancestors and the expectations of the emerging postcolonial society, through the portrayal of psychologically complex characters who seek to balance their moral obligations to society with a desire for personal freedom. A qualitative, interpretative and comparative research paper on the theme of tradition and modernity drawing insights from U. R. Ananthamurthy's fictional works namely *Samskara* (1965), *Bharathipura* (1963) and *Avasthe* (1978). Ananthamurthy's fictional works interrogates the issues raised by caste, religion, social change, political discourse, cultural discord and identity. According to Ananthamurthy's theory of modernity, post-colonial criticism and cultural identity, he does not consider tradition as a good, and erection with modernity as a means of overcoming social issues in India. Ananthamurthy narrates through the experiences of Praneshacharya, Jagannatha, and Krishnappa that there is a need for critical introspection, moral responsibility and continuous dialogue between ones values and reality, to bring about social change. Further it is argued that Ananthamurthy's fictional works hold true for contemporary debates concerning caste, religion, democracy and identity in India. Thus, Ananthamurthy's fictional works present change as a means of building connection, and not in opposition to tradition.

Keywords: U. R. Ananthamurthy, Tradition, Modernity, Social Change, Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis, Indian Literature

Introduction

The relationship between tradition and modernity has been a matter of great concern for Indian literature since independence. India, since her independence had undergone tremendous change socially, politically and economically through constitutional democracy, industrialization, modernization, globalization and education. However, despite these changes, Indian society continued to be guided by its traditional values like caste, religion and social practices. This led Indian writers to deliberate on the issue whether modernization would be a means of overcoming social issues, or whether tradition contained ethical resources for social change.

One of the most celebrated writers of post-independence era who engaged with the theme of tradition and modernity is U. R. Ananthamurthy. U. R. Ananthamurthy belonged to the Kannada Navya movement and was one of the most prominent writers of contemporary Indian Literature. Ananthamurthy's fictional works portray a nuanced understanding of Indian society, which views tradition and modernity as dynamic forces, which influence and transform each other. Ananthamurthy depicts a world where caste, religion, politics and personal identity are intertwined, and social change calls for constant ethical re-evaluation rather than mere change in social practices.

One of the most striking features of Ananthamurthy's fictional works is his focus on psychological realism and moral introspection. Unlike other writers of his time, Ananthamurthy examines the impact of modernization on the psychological make-up of individuals rather than focusing on mere social or political changes. The characters in his novels are neither idealistic nor hypocritical; instead they face a moral dilemma which questions their very identity. In other words, Ananthamurthy's portrayal of characters in his novels allows readers to connect with the moral predicaments faced by the characters in a transforming society rather than viewing social change as a monolithic entity.

The earliest example of such a portrayal of character in Ananthamurthy's works can be witnessed in *Samskara* (1965) through the character of Praneshacharya. *Samskara* (1965) revolves around the issue of death of Naranappa and the subsequent conflict regarding the performance of his last rites. Praneshacharya, the revered and respected religious leader of the town, is faced with the dilemma of whether Naranappa should be given the last rites according to the prescribed religious rites or not. According to the religious scriptures, the last rites could only be performed by him as the most learned and respected person in the town. Despite his vast knowledge of the scriptures, Praneshacharya is unable to make a decision regarding the performance of last rites. Praneshacharya's incapacity to take a decisive moral action despite being the most religious person in the town, questions the very basis of religion and its ability to guide people in leading a moral life.

Samskara (1965) presents a philosophical enquiry into the nature of goodness and its relation with religion. Ananthamurthy questions whether modernity calls for mere rejection of tradition or whether it advocates changes in existing social practices. The depiction of the failure

of Praneshacharya to perform his duty as a moral agent, questions the ability of religion to guide humans in leading a moral life. It can be argued that through the portrayal of Praneshacharya, Ananthamurthy attempts to propose a philosophical discourse regarding the nature of goodness. According to Ananthamurthy, goodness emanates from within rather than being imposed from outside by religious dogma.

Naranappa, the anti-hero of the novel is the trigger for the whole series of events that take place in the novel. Naranappa challenges the religious orthodoxy of the town regarding the caste system, untouchability and the various social practices. Though Naranappa is considered as a corrupt and immoral person by the society, he questions the very basis of the existing social order. The depiction of Naranappa indicates towards the hypocrisy of the existing social order, which follows the principles of religion for self-gain rather than following the moral principles of religion. Naranappa challenges the social order by opposing the very customs and traditions followed by society. Despite being an anti-hero, Naranappa does not conform to the conventional depiction of a villain; instead he is a trigger for social change.

The character of Praneshacharya also indicates towards the theme of change. Praneshacharya, who considers himself as the most religious person in the town, faces a major crisis of faith after his interaction with Naranappa and his own desires. The strength of character that Praneshacharya displays throughout the novel is quite in contrast with the weaknesses that he portrays. While at one hand he is a respected religious leader, on the other he is the supporter of the unjust social order. Through the depiction of Praneshacharya, Ananthamurthy enquires into the nature of goodness and highlights the necessity for change. The crisis of faith faced by Praneshacharya questions the ability of religious institutions to guide humans into leading a moral life. According to Ananthamurthy, change calls for introspection rather than blind faith in religious dogma.

While *Samskara* (1965) enquires into the nature of goodness and questions the ability of religious institutions to guide people into leading a moral life, Bharathipura focuses on the theme of caste and social change in post-independent India. Bharathipura presents a philosophical discourse on caste discrimination, which was still widely prevalent in Indian society despite the abolishment of caste system after independence. Bharathipura revolves around the character of Jagannatha, who is a Western-educated individual who comes back to his village with the aim of eradicating the social evil of caste discrimination. Jagannatha's efforts towards social change are successful as can be witnessed by his efforts towards making the Dalits enter the Manjunatha Temple. However, despite his efforts towards social change, Jagannatha is unsuccessful in his mission as the conflict between the two communities persists. Ananthamurthy focuses on the idea that democratic institutions were not sufficient in bringing about social change in India.

Ananthamurthy questions whether mere political changes would be sufficient in eradicating the social evils that had been prevailing since centuries. Through the depiction of Jagannatha, Ananthamurthy questions the very basis of democracy and its capability to bring about social change. According to Ananthamurthy's depiction of Jagannatha, democratic institutions were necessary but not sufficient in bringing about social change. Anthonymurthy

questions the nature of democratic institutions and their capability to ensure social equality by depicting the conflict between the two communities.

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Thus, both *Samskara* (1965) and *Bharathipura* indicate towards the philosophical enquiries into the nature of goodness and the basis of social equality. Ananthamurthy questions the ability of religion and democratic institutions to ensure social change and questions whether traditional values and modern ethics were incompatible. Ananthamurthy's focus on the necessity for change paved way for his next work *Avasthe*, which focused on the theme of modern politics. *Avasthe* examines the moral crisis of democratic politics in post-independent India. *Avasthe* questions the ability of democratic institutions to ensure social equality despite the theoretical basis of democracy on the principles of equality and fraternity. The protagonist of the work Krishnappa is an idealistic politician who believes in the principles of democracy, equality and fraternity, which were enshrined in the Indian Constitution. However, Krishnappa faces a crisis of faith as he realizes the practical difficulties of implementing democratic principles in Indian society. The depiction of Krishnappa questions the theoretical basis of democracy and questions the ability of democratic institutions to ensure social change.

Thus, *Avasthe* (1978) presents a philosophical enquiry into the nature of modern politics. Ananthamurthy questions whether democratic institutions were sufficient in bringing about social change or whether they needed to be restructured. Ananthamurthy presents a critical analysis of democratic institutions and questions their ability to overcome social evils like caste discrimination. The depiction of Krishnappa questions the very basis of democratic institutions and questions whether political modernization was necessary for social transformation.

Thus, the theme of change runs common through all the three literary works *Samskara* (1965), *Bharathipura* (1963) and *Avasthe* (1978). While the first two works focus on the theme of social change and its basis on moral values, the third work focuses on the theme of political change and its basis on moral values. Ananthamurthy questions the ability of various institutions like religion, caste and democracy to ensure social change. Ananthamurthy provides a philosophical discourse on social issues prevalent in Indian society and questions whether mere modernization would be a solution to these issues. Ananthamurthy's fictional works present a critical analysis of social practices and questions their basis on moral values.

Another common thread that runs through all the three literary works is the theme of identity. Ananthamurthy depicts the identity crisis of the protagonists of his work when they are faced with the dilemma of choosing between modern values and traditional values. The protagonist of all the three literary works Praneshacharya, Jagannatha and Krishnappa are faced with the dilemma of choosing between modern and traditional values. They have to navigate through their identity in the constantly changing environment, which challenges their very foundation of morality.

Jagannatha's identity in *Bharathipura* (1963) represents another stream of conflict. Educated in the West and imbued with liberal democratic ideas, he comes back to India with a desire to uproot caste discrimination, but his privileged status continues to colour his views, making him susceptible to unconscious paternalism. Ananthamurthy deliberately avoids stereotyping his main character as a crusader or a villain; instead, he creates a heroic yet ambiguous personality, who embodies the dilemma of an Indian trying to free him from the bonds of tradition.

Krishnappa in *Avasthe* is another manifestation of the same theme. Unlike Praneshacharya and Jagannatha, whose conflicts are determined by religion and caste, Krishnappa embodies the predicament of a politician who begins to understand the corruption and compromises in democratic politics. Disillusioned with the existing system, he tries to find new values to guide his behaviour, and his problems reflect the complex issues of ethics in public life.

Ananthamurthy's fictional universe thus accommodates a variety of identities that reflect different aspects of social conflicts. The shifting perspectives of his protagonists correspond to the theories of identity put forward by modern sociologists. Stuart Hall, who viewed identity as a dynamic and continuous process of 'becoming', would certainly recognise Ananthamurthy's fictional world as an illustration of his theoretical notions. Hall's protagonists also experience confusion and uncertainty as they search for their true identity, but they all have one thing in common: continuous transformation.

Ananthamurthy's fictional protagonists also correspond to Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity. Like Bhabha's protagonists, they inhabit the borderland between two cultures, negotiating their hybrid identity in the context of postcolonial history. They represent the intersection of tradition and modernity, where the old mixes with the new, creating unexpected meanings and generating new possibilities. Ananthamurthy's interest in the complexities of identity is thus part of a general trend in postmodern literature to explore alternative ways of conceptualising the self in a multicultural world.

Ananthamurthy also shares with Western postmodern writers a suspicious attitude towards the traditional dichotomy between good and evil. Neither his protagonists nor the society they live in are completely good or evil. Even the most despised characters - Naranappa in *Samskara* (1965) and Jagannatha in *Bharathipura* turn out to be victims of the very system they serve. On the other hand, even the most admired figures - Praneshacharya or Krishnappa - reveal ambiguous and sometimes disgusting features. Ananthamurthy thereby problematises the entire concept of good and evil, exposing the hidden contradictions in human nature. At the same time, he invites the reader to a more tolerant attitude to the complex social and ethical issues these problems represent.

A close examination of the three novels thus reveals a consistent philosophical message. Ananthamurthy examines the fundamentals of morality in a changing social context and shows that both tradition and modernity have the potential for goodness but also include the seeds of evil. He exposes the limitations of social and political institutions in promoting ethical values but

simultaneously underlines the responsibility of each individual in the development of history. Ananthamurthy thereby bridges the gap between abstract philosophical concepts and their practical application in everyday life, making his novels an excellent illustration of the relevance of philosophical ideas in contemporary social discourse.

The lasting impact of U. R. Ananthamurthy's writings on Indian literature is determined by their extraordinary relevance to the modern social and cultural context. Although the novels were written several decades ago, the issues they raise continue to resonate in contemporary Indian society. Economic growth, globalisation, technological innovations, and democratic reforms have brought India to the forefront of world politics, but many social problems remain urgent. The contradictions of Indian identity, the tensions between different cultural traditions, and the complexities of moral identity continue to be a topic of heated debates, and the relevance of Ananthamurthy's ideas is evident in the numerous literary and philosophical discourses they inspired.

Ananthamurthy's contribution to the Indian cultural tradition is multifaceted, but his most important philosophical insight concerns the re-evaluation of the basic tenets of tradition. Unlike many contemporary writers who emphasised the negative impact of India's cultural heritage on its social and political development, Ananthamurthy recognises the complexity of traditional values. Religious mysticism, caste discrimination, or patriarchal power structures may have a corrupting influence on human relationships, but they also contain the seeds of goodness and wisdom. When divorced from their historical context, they lose their meaning, but as long as people cling to them, they will serve as stumbling blocks in the development of Indian society. Ananthamurthy thus highlights the relative nature of all values, pointing out that none of them is eternal. The function of literature, in his view, is to help people recognise this relativity and its implications for their moral and spiritual development.

At the same time, Ananthamurthy never romanticises modernity as the ultimate solution to all social ills. The promises of democratic freedoms, scientific advancement, and economic growth fail to fill the void left by lost spiritual values. On the contrary, the very mechanisms of modernity - competitive elections, parliamentary procedures, or market regulations - may corrupt human relationships and create new forms of oppression. Jagannatha's naive faith in liberal democratic principles reveals the hypocrisy of the modern political system, where officials invoke human rights to pursue their narrow interests. The same scepticism is expressed in Krishnappa's disillusioned view of parliamentary democracy, which exposes the banality of modern politicians. Ananthamurthy thus recognises the limitations of modernity as well, emphasising the failure of contemporary social and political movements to bring about real change in human consciousness.

What makes Ananthamurthy's message even more compelling is his ability to combine these abstract philosophical ideas with a vivid portrayal of his characters' lives and emotions. Unlike many Indian writers of the twentieth century, who often wrote about abstract ideas and events, Ananthamurthy emphasises the centrality of the individual in historical transformations.

His novels thus contain a number of literary devices that illustrate the complex interactions between individuals and the larger social forces shaping their historical development.

The symbolic meanings attributed to various objects and events in the novels reflect the author's interest in the fundamental moral dilemmas faced by his protagonists. Naranappa's uncremated body in *Samskara* (1965) symbolises the continuity of Indian values, which transcends caste divisions and family relationships. The same theme of continuity is represented by the imagery of the newly built temple in Bharathipura, which serves as a powerful symbol of faith and identity for Jagannatha's community. At the same time, the entire episode with the entry to the temple can be seen as a metaphor for a more comprehensive social conflict. The same applies to political symbolism in *Avasthe*, where parliamentary elections and ideological confrontations represent a single conflict between opposing views on morality and identity. Through such symbolic means, Ananthamurthy not only conveys the uniqueness of his characters' struggles but also establishes a connection between an individual and a collective historical experience.

The role of women in Ananthamurthy's fictional world is modest, but he manages to depict their ambiguous position in Indian society with surprising precision. They appear mainly as the victims of male oppression - whether in the form of caste segregation, domestic violence, or ideological manipulation. Nevertheless, they also represent the hidden forces that determine the fate of men. This ambivalence is reflected in the symbolic function of female characters in the novel. As a result, Ananthamurthy's portrayal of women opens up new discourses for the critics to explore. His emphasis on gender issues thus creates new opportunities for research and promotes a more comprehensive assessment of his contribution to Indian literature.

A comparative analysis of the three novels thus reveals the depth and complexity of Ananthamurthy's philosophical ideas. Although he focuses on different aspects of Indian social history - religious orthodoxy, caste oppression, or political corruption - the underlying message remains the same. Ananthamurthy emphasises the relativity of all moral judgements, the limitations of social and political institutions, and the transformative potential of human agency. He examines the contradictions of identity formation in a changing historical context and exposes the ambiguous role of tradition and modernity in this process. This interest in philosophical issues and the recognition of literature's role in its dissemination make Ananthamurthy's novels especially valuable in the modern cultural context.

Another aspect of Ananthamurthy's writings that deserves attention is the novelist's emphasis on the importance of ethics in social transformations. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who analysed the structural determinants of historical change, he explores the inner dynamics of character development. By doing so, he recognises the limitations of any deterministic approach to literature and history. Ananthamurthy thus adds another dimension to the ongoing discourse on Indian social transformations - one that emphasises the importance of ethical values in human actions and decisions.

While Ananthamurthy's novels examine serious and often controversial topics, the author manages to depict his characters' moral struggles with remarkable empathy. His interest in

ethical identity determines the novelist's attention to his characters' inner lives, which allows him to create strikingly realistic portraits. This focus on psychological realism is another novelty in Indian literature, as it responds to the demand for a more humane and empathetic portrayal of the self.

Finally, the novelist's attention to symbolic details and dramatic action makes his stories exceptionally compelling. The use of metaphor, allegory, and dramatic contrasts between different social groups gives Ananthamurthy's narratives a unique flavour that distinguishes them from other Indian novels of the twentieth century. As a result, Indian literature gained an author whose works combine the best traditions of modern Indian poetry and prose. Ananthamurthy thus became a true pioneer - one of the first novelists in Indian history to combine literary merits with philosophical depth.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of such works as *Samskara* (1965), *Bharathipura* (1963), and *Avasthe* (1978) allows for examining how U. R. Ananthamurthy engages with Indian literature from the perspective of philosophy, which is entirely different from the views of his contemporaries. In his books, the author does not seek to establish the relationship between tradition and change, emphasizing the interaction between the two. Ananthamurthy's stories show that both modernity and tradition have their pros and cons; however, the strength of spiritual power, democracy, and progressive thoughts is that these elements require reflection, a holistic approach, and compassion to be fulfilled.

An analysis of the three principal novels by U. R. Ananthamurthy shows that he manages to convey different layers of communication and social interactions. Regardless of whether modernity is presented in the form of religious discrimination, caste oppression, or the power dynamics of the colonial past, the key idea remains the same: inner transformation and modernization are the only conditions for social and personal evolution. What is more, the author's approach to highlighting the concept of identity seems to contradict many theories. Yet, in his works, the author examines the dynamics of the formation of an individual's personality in the context of culture, history, and democratic principles. Thus, Ananthamurthy's writings seem to present a bird's eye view on diverse topics: identity, modernity, morality, justice, and even freedom.

To summarize, it is important to note that U. R. Ananthamurthy's writings offer the readers a possibility to look at the elements of Indian culture from a variety of perspectives. The author's central idea emphasizes that neither change nor tradition can bring a person true happiness and understanding of himself. As such, a person should actively seek to obtain a complete knowledge of the concept of goodness, love, and transformation. Due to this idea, the three books under review remain popular and relevant as they allow readers to find a path toward change.

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