



Modernity and Tradition in Short Stories of U.R. Ananthamurthy

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Abstract: U.R. Ananthamurthy stands as a towering figure in Kannada short story literature, along with Masti Venkatesha Iyengar. As his family background is 'brahmin', His stories majorly point to the life of Brahminical society, post-independence. His stories, Prakrithi, Ghatashraddha, Clip Joint, expose the conflicts between modern aspirations and inherited cultural values. They also expose conflicts between rural traditional life and modern urban life. The 'Navya' style of stories are Modern era story explaining the life of people post-independence and conflicts due to modernization and urbanization in the surrounding world. Characters in the stories 'kitti', 'keshava', 'narayana', suffer from internal contradictions. They are victims of changing society. The stories concentrate on conflicts in the families, particularly to holding out for old cultural values, and modern evolutions. Many cultural values showcased here are gender unequal, lack of freedom, dissatisfaction, and spiritual emptiness. This paper, concentrates on themes like 'Tradition vs. Modernity', 'Inner Psychological Conflict', 'Moral and Emotional Fragility', 'Gender and Patriarchy', 'Alienation in Modern Life', and 'Cultural Dissonance' in the short stories written by U.R. Anantha Murthy.

Keywords: Navya stories, Modernity, Tradition, Short Stories, Anantha Murthy.

1. Introduction

U.R. Ananthamurthy stands as a towering figure in Kannada short story literature, along with Masti Venkatesha Iyengar. Among the genres of modern Kannada literature, Ananthamurthy adopted the short story form as his primary medium of expression. We may cite the opinion of G.H. Nayak, who said: "Ananthamurthy's real achievement is greater in his short stories than in his novels" (Nayak, n.d., p. 178).

In his stories, we find both minds that follow traditional, inherited values and those that embrace modernity. As already known, a core feature of Navya (modernist) storytelling is the mindset that questions traditional values and, through that questioning, embarks on a search for new values. Due to modern education and urban life, a social condition emerges where characters neither wish to accept the old nor are ready to fully embrace the new. Such tension is portrayed in the stories of Ananthamurthy. Though many characters seem to reject tradition and adopt modernity, the conflicts that arise when these two confront each other form the focus of analysis. Studies by scholars like Amoor (n.d.) and Beechanahalli (2022) provide critical frameworks for understanding the evolution of the Kannada short story and its cultural roots. In this research, the following representative stories by Ananthamurthy are studied:

- Prakriti.
- Clip Joint.
- Ghatashraddha.
- Navilugalu (Peacocks)

2. Literature Survey

In paper, researcher explores how existentialist philosophy, especially the conflict between the individual (self) and societal expectations, is portrayed in the major literary works of U.R. Ananthamurthy, a prominent modernist writer in Kannada literature (Sindhu, 2023). The research is concentrated majorly on four short stories, Samskara, Bharathipura, Clip Joint, and Bhava.

The author points out that Ananthamurthy's protagonists are existential figures who battle internal conflict, moral

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confusion, and societal pressures. He reflects ambiguous, fragmented modern experience but does not provide clear answers. His works critique both traditional dogma and modern illusions, leaving the individual to seek meaning through personal awareness and introspection.

(Pal, 2013) explores how Ananthamurthy's protagonists' rebel against ritualistic Brahminical society. The novels concentrated here are *Samskara*, *Bharathipura*, *Short Stories Stallion of the Sun*, *Clip Joint*, *The Question*, *Jaratkaru*, and *Mouni*. author examines, Critique caste-based oppression, challenges ritual purity and Brahminical authority, and promotes spiritual awakening through personal experience rather than ritual. highlights the psychological toll of gender and social repression in the stories of Ananthamurthy.

3. Prakriti (Nature)

This story is part of Ananthamurthy's second short story collection titled 'Prashne' (Question). Critics have noted that Ananthamurthy uses the word "Prakriti" (nature) in two senses:

- Human temperament or innate character.
- The surrounding physical environment. (Ananthamurthy, 2007, pp. 96-97) As the name suggests, the story simultaneously portrays ongoing clashes between:
- Man, and nature.
- Man, and man.

Each character in the story is shown as having a distinct mental nature or disposition. The protagonist Sankappayya is shown as the patriarch of the family representing the older generation and as a symbol of strong will. He was awarded a silver medal by the District Collector (D.C.) himself as an excellent farmer of the Malnad region.

He battled with hills to build a plantation. Even in an areca-nut plantation, he stubbornly attempted to cultivate oranges despite it being unsuitable soil. He carried the burden of a ₹20,000 debt due to this madness.

Even though the whole village advised against it, he poured thousands of rupees into this orange orchard and failed to yield even a single fruit. His wife Seetamma even pawned her jewelry to take out a loan to support his dream.

Yet, he refused to give up his foolish obsession. "As long as there is breath, struggle is not in vain. Let's see why the orange trees won't bear fruit," he declares—a man of determination, even if it's misdirected. Here, we see the foolishness of going against nature—trying to grow oranges in land unsuitable for it. Narayana, Sankappayya's son, lacks faith in traditional farming and dreams of modern employment. With help from his uncle in Shivamogga, he plans to start a hotel business with his cousin Kitti, thus rejecting his father's traditional values. Even Seetamma supports him, tired of her life in the old joint family house. She desires change and backs her son's hotel ambitions. Though initially Narayana appears forceful and rebellious, he fails to confront his father directly. His desire to start the hotel erupts in anger before his mother, but when he confronts his father's imposing presence, his voice trembles he appears weak and fragile.

Sankappayya insults him saying: "A wretched fellow who roams the market smoking beedis—this is the kind of son I have?" Thus, Narayana emerges as a weak personality, unable to stand firm before his father. Sankappayya's daughter Lakshmi, who returns to her paternal home as a widow just six months after marriage, appears as barren as the orange grove. Due to excessive affection for his daughter, even after his wife and son rebel and leave the house, Sankappayya clings to the belief: "She won't leave me. As long as Lakshmi is with me, they cannot stand against me."

But eventually, his strength collapses for two reasons:

1. When his banana and areca plantations are destroyed by an elephant attack just as they begin to bear fruit.
2. When he sees Lakshmi with Kitti, he realizes she too is slipping away.

These two incidents shatter his mental stability.

In the end, Sankappayya sells his house and land, sends his family to Shivamogga to support Narayana's hotel business, but he stays behind alone in the village. Through this, Ananthamurthy symbolically portrays the defeat of Sankappayya before nature and his son. Ironically, after selling the orange orchard, it flourishes under the hands of the new owner.

The story reflects how urbanization and modernity bring changes that displace traditional rural life. The "hotel" becomes a symbol of modernity and urban life. Sankappayya, opposing it, represents the old generation, while Narayana, supporting it, represents the new. Thus, the story vividly captures the conflict between the mentalities of the older and younger generations.

4. Clip Joint

Among the many short stories that portray cultural differences and contrasting lifestyles, Ananthamurthy's "Clip Joint" holds a significant place. In this story, two opposing ways of life Eastern (Indian) and Western cultures—are brought face to face. Through this confrontation, the story explores the question: Which lifestyle is more meaningful?

The character Keshava has lived an Indian way of life. But within this lifestyle, bound by social rules and customs, he does not find comfort or fulfillment. He is dissatisfied because there are obstacles that prevent him from living freely and experiencing life as he desires. Thus, Keshava becomes a representative of young, restless minds who are discontented and frustrated with tradition.

Though he is 32 years old, Keshava is still unmarried. He carries the responsibility of a large family four unmarried sisters, two brothers, and a widowed mother. He is a middle-aged man, working as a lecturer, burdened by the reality that in Indian society, it is not possible to live as one pleases. He has tried to escape family chaos and pursue new experiences by moving from India to England. Yet, even while living in the present, Keshava cannot free himself from his past he is haunted by it.

On the other hand, Stuart, who is born and raised in England, desires that life should have a purpose. He loves Indian culture.

Stuart says: "Life must have some conflict. It must not just slip by easily. Oh! I am bored terribly bored. There's no life in

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England. In this happy society, there is no purpose in life” (Ananthamurthy, 2007, p. 212).

Through these words, Stuart responds to the concept of "happiness" that Keshava seeks, questioning whether it is even fulfilling. What appears attractive to Keshava seems meaningless to Stuart.

Both Keshava and Stuart are unhappy with the societies they live in. Stuart is tired of extreme modernity and mechanical life. He doesn't find the Western lifestyle appealing it's a self-centered world.

He admires the warmth of Indian family ties, where blood relations are still alive and valued. But Keshava has experienced the oppressive side of traditional society and despises it. So, even after leaving Indian society to explore new experiences, he fails to find fulfillment in the Western world too. Why? Because he is unable to recognize and resolve the inner conflicts within himself.

Critics note: “Keshava struggles without being able to let go of his past” (Govindaraju, 2023, p. 380).

Though Keshava seeks modernity, he reluctantly agrees to marry Bhagirathi his sister's daughter due to pressure from his mother and sisters. He believes his sisters should have the freedom to choose their own husbands, but this is only a surface-level belief. In truth, he is not truly liberal.

He says: “If that ever happened, I would be the first one to get angry” (Ananthamurthy, 2007, p. 210).

This reflects the contradiction within Indian youth—radicals outside the home, but traditionalists inside. Even while claiming to accept modern ideals, Keshava cannot truly detach himself from the patriarchal, male-dominated framework of Indian society.

Critics say: “Though Keshava physically moves far away to another country, he mentally continues to struggle with his past and his upbringing” (Govindaraju, 2023, p. 380).

His unmarried sisters, jobless brothers, and the fact that he alone runs the household all feed into his sense of ego. His siblings have chosen paths they believe in, yet Keshava is haunted by memories and responsibilities that continue to follow him like a shadow.

Keshava himself says: “Like countless Indian youths, I too have no strong foundation” (Ananthamurthy, 2007, p. 229).

This statement highlights the psychological turbulence of modern Indian youth. In the end, Keshava arrives at the realization: “Probably, in no state of society is a person truly happy. Perhaps, this constant restlessness is an eternal human need.”

Critics note that both Keshava and Stuart are spiritually restless—they both experience a kind of existential discomfort. Their

Perspectives are different:

- Stuart believes life must have a purpose.
- Keshava believes there is no real meaning or belief even in purpose.

Thus, they appear as individuals who escape their own cultures, searching for meaning in a new social life yet both remain disillusioned.

5. Ghatashraddha

Among the modern Kannada short stories, ‘Ghatashraddha’ holds a prominent place. It can be said that the story achieved a kind of artistic success for the writer.

This story is centered around the orthodox customs and rituals of the Brahmin community.

It portrays:

- The natural desires of a young widow
- The obstacles and anxieties she faces in fulfilling them
- And how the traditional agrahara (Brahmin settlement) reacts to her behavior

While questioning traditional values, the story also pushes the reader toward exploring new values. This concern of critically examining inherited values can be observed in almost all of Ananthamurthy's stories.

Summary of Story and Interpretation

Yamunakka, the protagonist, is a widow who lost her husband just a few days after marriage. She returns to her maternal home, but she struggles to suppress her natural emotional and physical desires. Eventually, Yamunakka develops a physical relationship with a man in the same village, a teacher (mestru). But in the conservative Brahmin environment she lives in, even seeing a widow interact with a man is considered a grave sin, let alone having an actual relationship. When Yamunakka's relationship is exposed, the entire agrahara turns against her with harsh condemnation. They brand her immoral and ostracize her from society.

Yet, Yamunakka emerges as a dynamic and defiant character. Though a woman of the Brahmin community, she rejects traditional values and chooses a physical relationship with the man (the teacher) of her desire. If she had succeeded in keeping the child conceived from this relationship, the story would have taken a transformative turn. But sadly, she fails. Due to pressure from the teacher and societal fear, she undergoes an inhumane abortion.

Modern Themes in the Story

In Navya (modernist) storytelling, key features include:

- A focus on individual-centered issues
- An introspective narrative approach

While Ghatashraddha deals with a social issue, ‘the widow's condition,’ its emphasis lies more on the personal and emotional dimension of the protagonist. Yamunakka's pain as a child widow, her psychological torment, and her inability to

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repress her natural desires are portrayed in a deeply moving and empathetic way. The teacher (mestru), though appearing as a symbol of modernity he's educated, rides a bicycle ultimately fails Yamunakka. When their illicit relationship is exposed, instead of standing by her, he runs away, fearing for his reputation. Worse, he forces her to abort the child in a cruel and insensitive manner. After that, he abandons her completely.

Nani - A Symbol of Innocence and Empathy: A young boy named Nani plays a crucial role in the story. He is from Shivapura and lives as a student (vatu) in the house of Sheshagiri Udupa in the agrahara. In the narrative, Nani serves as the narrator and the reader's lens. His innocent sympathy stands in contrast to the cruelty of the adult world. Other boys Vishwanatha Shastri and Ganesh who are also studying under Udupa, act as spies. They discover Yamunakka's relationship and spread the news throughout the agrahara, adding to her humiliation.

The Tragic Arc of Yamunakka: Unable to bear the mental agony, Yamunakka attempts suicide. Even in this, she fails. A Christian priest visits her and offers refuge, saying: "God saves sinners. Don't be afraid. The people of your agrahara will abandon you. Come with me to the church we will give you protection there."

These words frighten her. Much like Choma in Shivaram Karanth's Chomana Dudi, who fears the Panjurli deity when he contemplates converting to Christianity, Yamunakka too fears the religious taboos of her Vedic upbringing and so flees. Some days later, the Udupa family performs the funeral rites (shraddha) for Yamunakka while she is still alive. This act symbolically reflects how rigid Brahminical society erases living people who defy its values.

The Bitter Irony: The story reaches a sharp and ironic climax when young Nani reflects: "Old men like Udupa, even older than Appayya, marry young girls and share a wedding bed with them..." Here, Ananthamurthy exposes the male-centered hypocrisy of Brahminical society. While older men's desires are justified and fulfilled through remarriage, a young woman's natural desires are condemned and punished. The story shows how such a society values only male desires and silences female autonomy (Ananthamurthy, 2007, pp. 181, 200).

6. Navilugalu (Peacocks)

Though Navilugalu is a story written after 1972, it still carries the core characteristics of Navya (modernist) storytelling. The protagonist of this story is Kittu, a man who suffers from internal unrest. Despite having access to modern education and the comforts of urban life, he is not content. He has a feeling that something is missing, and he is caught in the search for a deeper meaning.

At the very beginning of the story, Kittu reflects: "I've built a house in Bangalore, installed a phone, admitted both children to good schools, yet I feel trapped. Whenever I get angry, I feel like saying 'to hell with it all' but I can't live like my father, who once just quit his job and walked away" (Ananthamurthy, 2007, p. 260).

This confession reveals that even though Kittu has a job, a wife, children, a house, and all urban conveniences, he has no emotional or spiritual attachment to any of them. He yearns for a life that's more meaningful and authentic. He says: "It's true—I am still searching for something."

I don't even know what it is, but I know I'm searching." Just like Keshava in Clip Joint, Kittu too is haunted by a vague but powerful inner restlessness, a longing for something undefined but profound (Ananthamurthy, 2007, p. 265).

A Return to the Village - A Search for Purity:

Feeling disillusioned by his current life, Kittu decides to return to his village along with his family. He hopes that by revisiting the places of his childhood, he might recover the innocence and purity he once felt. He especially wants to go back to a hill near the village a place he remembers fondly from his youth. In his childhood, he had seen peacocks dancing there, and that moment left a deep, joyous impression on him. Now, as an adult, he wants to relive that moment of wonder. But when he goes there, he realizes: "The peacocks came again, they danced and went away. While they were dancing, one of their feathers fell off. I collected those feathers for my daughter" (Ananthamurthy, 2007, p. 266).

Here, the peacock feathers become a symbol. They are beautiful remnants of a glorious past, but they are just memories they do not bring back the full experience. Kittu is left with only traces of his childhood joy, not the actual joy itself. The innocence, purity, and intense connection to nature he once had are no longer accessible.

A Life Divided - Longing and Defeat:

As he reflects, Kittu sees that his life has been fragmented into many stages—childhood, adulthood, success, family. He tries to evaluate these phases, to find spiritual meaning in them. But even though he has worldly success, he is not happy. The modern world has made him mechanical, restless, and emotionally disconnected. Even his return to the village does not give him the peace he seeks.

He confesses: "I wanted to live the way I truly felt - but the circumstances wouldn't allow it." Though he desperately searches for something holy, innocent, or pure, he is doomed to fail. Like Keshava in Clip Joint, Kittu is also a man who is torn - caught between modernity and the past, success and emptiness. Despite having every material comfort, he struggles with contradictions within himself. He has no inner clarity, and he becomes a victim of his own divided emotions. Even in his effort to find inner peace, Kittu fails quietly.

Summary of the Section

In Navilugalu, Ananthamurthy masterfully portrays a modern man's psychological and spiritual crisis. The story does not show any grand conflict or external drama it is an introspective journey. The protagonist has everything, yet he is spiritually hollow. Even the act of returning to one's roots becomes a failed pilgrimage. This story reflects the common theme in Ananthamurthy's works: Modern success cannot replace lost innocence.

7. Summary and Conclusion

When we observe the themes and structure of U.R. Ananthamurthy's short stories, we notice that:

- His protagonists are usually sensitive, well-educated, introspective, and emotionally vulnerable young men.
- These characters often find themselves in constant conflict—between their personal beliefs and the pressures of the social environment they live in.

If we look closely, it becomes clear that the Navya literary movement's concept of a weak or morally conflicted protagonist was first explored in depth through Ananthamurthy's stories. Some of his characters are memorable because they long for change—they are moved by a desire to break free from what binds them. Further academic discourse on the intersection of tradition and modernity in Ananthamurthy's work has been explored in depth by Sujana (2011) and Patil (2022), reinforcing the complexity of these existential themes.

Narrative Techniques in Ananthamurthy's Stories

In terms of storytelling technique, Ananthamurthy:

- Places the central conflict either within the character's inner world (as in Navilugalu),
- In the social or communal setting (as in Mouni),
- Or in clashes between civilizations or cultures (as in Clip Joint).

He skillfully adapts his narrative method based on the theme and context of each story.

Setting and Environment

The backdrop of most of his stories is:

- A Brahmin family or village society,
- Often situated in a traditional rural setting.

This pattern is clearly visible not only in stories like Prakriti, Clip Joint, Ghatashraddha, and Mouni, but also in his novels such as Samskara and Bharathipura. Ananthamurthy frequently uses the literary strategy of Bringing opposing forces into direct confrontation (such as tradition vs. modernity, personal desire vs. societal norms, East vs. West).

Final Insight on Protagonists

In many stories, the central characters lack firm moral or ideological clarity. They are not heroes in the conventional sense. Instead, they are often shown as:

- Failing,
- Withdrawing, or
- Becoming silent under pressure.

This portrayal is deliberate - it reflects the existential and moral dilemmas of modern individuals, particularly in a changing Indian society.

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