



STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVEL AMPASHAYYA/ BED OF THORNS BY NAVEEN

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The Telugu novelist and Sahitya Akademi award winner Naveen created a niche for himself in the literary world way back in 1966 with his first work *Ampasayya*, a novel that reflected socio-political scenario of his college days in the backdrop of Osmania University. By profession an economics lecturer, Naveen inadvertently wrote his novels that devised *stream of consciousness* a narrative technique that was mastered by the 20th Century Irish writer James Augustine Aloysius Joyce.

Naveen enjoys a prominent position as a novelist. He has a heart which responds with a surprising sensitivity. In everything he writes, especially in his novels and short stories, he packs a lot of emotion. He wrote *Ampasayya* basing it on his own experiences as a university student.

Capturing the consciousness of mainly the protagonist Ravi, which has been so brilliantly accomplished in the Telugu original novel has not been easily given the cultural and linguistic hurdles faced by the translators. Nevertheless, this article explores the *stream of consciousness* of a young hero Ravi on different aspects of adolescent life.

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INTRODUCTION

Telugu literature boasts of more than 30,000 novels of different descriptions. If one selects the greatest one hundred among them, Naveen's *Ampasayya* will certainly figure among the top ten. This novel initiated, and continues to serve as an example of, an important trend in Telugu fiction, namely the 'stream of consciousness' narrative mode.

Ampasayya depicts the life of a university student Ravi within the span of just sixteen hours. The emphasis is on the psycho-economic factors of the times. It has been translated into Hindi and English and gone to six editions in Telugu. The

experiences and thoughts of this student in such a short time swell into three hundred and odd pages.

Ampasayya focused on the unpleasant realities in the glorified university campuses. *Ampasayya* is also the first Telugu novel to have used the stream of consciousness technique extensively, if not throughout.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Naveen wrote *Ampasayya* in 1966 and published it in 1969. It was his first novel. He adopted the stream of consciousness technique of narration. 'Stream of consciousness' is a method of narration that describes in words the flow of thoughts in the minds of the characters. It is a person's thoughts and conscious reactions to events, perceived as a



continuous flow. The term was introduced by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). It is a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust are among its notable early exponents.

The novel specially focuses through the consciousness of its young protagonist Ravi on certain aspects of adolescent life: the reality about universities and other educational institutions, the class ideology background and its various manifestations in student life is depicted. The inner struggle of a sensitive university student who hails from a middle class agricultural background especially with respect to his responsibility towards his family and the anxiety and sexual unrest which make the world appear in very attractive light.

Naveen enjoys a unique position as a novelist. He has a heart which responds with a surprising sensitivity. In everything he writes, especially in his novels and short stories, he packs a lot of emotion. His own struggles, thoughts, longings, ideals, expectations, experiences, loves, jealousies and emotional outpourings form the essential themes of Ampasayya. The protagonist Ravi is modeled after himself. He is determined not to kill his conscience as he says:

"Most horrible. How awful are our Universities? Are these the professors who stand as ideal examples? It is disgusting. Whatever you say, I cannot kill my conscience. I will write on Marx what I feel." (p 13)

In the course of their discussion on various topics, Ravi tells Ramesh, "Do you think I am jealous that you want to go to America? Our inner conscience knows who is jealous of whom." (p 28)

This novel depicts the situation prevailing in Osmania University in the 1960s and the experiences of young men studying there reflected through the mind of a student. This student represents the large majority of the student community of the time. He has a keen interest in literature and films, knows how to analyse politics, experiences the pressures occasioned by the realization of the need to escape

poverty by visualizing the future life and succumbs to the temptations of beauty and sex.

When he talks about Chalam, his outbursts reveal how painful he feels thinking of his parents,

"We are suppressing our inner conscience which has been shouting that we are behaving cruelly towards our parents in the name of Chalam." (p 34)

The experiences of today's youth might be different but the anxiety and unrest they go through are the same. That is why even to this day readers, especially young readers, easily identify themselves with Ravi and they too share his world with a ready willingness and find their own reflection in him. The regionalism, caste prejudices, nepotism, hollowness and dishonesty of the so called intellectuals, the prevalent ideology that was intent on proving that there was nothing wrong in getting things done through dishonest means. The argument on regionalism was prevalent in 1960's though the state of Telangana came into existent just two years back.

It was equally alright to stake one's self-respect in the process, the necessity to fight every minute of the university life in order to emerge from the campus with one's individuality and self-respect still intact and the settling of scores with people who held different views through non-intellectual means were common then and they are common even now.

The innocence qualifying village life is reflected in the thoughts of Ravi. Every minute of his life he thinks of how he has been a burden to his family and how he has to fulfill the dreams of his parents. After a long argument with his classmates, he realizes that there was no peace for him until he went home. "If he can't see his mother, if he does not confess to her what he did all these days there will be no peace in his heart." (p 59)

The helplessness of his father and the glaring economic disparities in the villages cause him much pain and mental tension. His close attachment with his mother saves him to an extent from the destructive nature of this psychological struggle. He understands that all that his parents want is that he should comfortably settle down in life by finding a well-paid job. They have sold their lands and cattle in order to support his studies. It is their way of providing for his future. They view it as a way out



from their poverty and the social inequalities obtaining in the village.

Ravi realizes that feudal culture has spread to the cities and even to the university campus. Although most of the students do not happen to belong to the land owning class, they have unconsciously imbibed the feudal value system. The novel has been written in the stream of consciousness mode primarily to depict the inner struggle of Ravi who continuously finds himself the focal point of distinct forces acting persistently upon him as he argues about politics with Ranga Reddy and Srisailam. People who seek truth have no place in the university.

It is more of a training ground for the selfishness of people through threats and bribes. One has to sacrifice one's self-respect to fit into the system. Otherwise, one has to struggle and join ranks of the people who suffer. People like Ranga Reddy and Srisailam who want to show their superiority over the fellow students are the representatives of the feudal value system on the university campus. Although Sagar hails from feudal background, Ramesh is focused on his own career and Nidhi has many contradictions, they join forces against the former two. They recognize Venu, who shows a surprising revolutionary fervour, as their leader. Ravi's war of nerves with Ranga Reddy and Srisailam ends with his moving closer to Venu in ideological terms.

For Ravi and others who suffer like him the university campus, indeed life itself, becomes a bed of arrows. Ironically the bed of arrows in question alludes to the patriarch Bhishma who spent the last few days of his life lying on this uncomfortable bed after experiencing a long and eventful life. But in Ampasayya it is very young people like Ravi and Venu who experience the agony of the bed of arrows. The unrest and agony result for these young men from the prospect of an uncertain future and the feeling that they are using their parents as mere economic and emotional supporters. Especially Ravi, who shows a marked tendency to escape into the dream world when he finds it difficult to reconcile the inner world with the one outside, receives many rude shocks as reality imposes on him constantly.

There is also clear evidence of this young man Ravi experiencing uncertainty because of the inability to subscribe to an ideology and identify clear aims and goals. Young men like Venu who had consciously developed an ideological basis for life were rare and hard to come by during the 1960s. Against this background Prakash, who looks upon women as mere objects, and Sagar with his pronounced feudal sympathies aligning with Venu comes as a big surprise and shows the lack of moral strength and ideological confusion of the young men of the age.

In terms of technique Ampasayya is a uniquely experimental novel. A close examination of the novel would reveal that the technique has not been used throughout like in James Joyce's *Ulysses* or in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In Ampasayya this technique has been used periodically in the first ten pages, last five pages and in between in the monologues of the hero Ravi and not elsewhere especially in the important episodes which move the story forward.

Thus, in the hundreds of pages in which Ravi discusses with his friends the politics of the day, studies and other matters, the flashback in which he recalls his meeting with lecturer Upendra, the Kiranmayi episode and the experiences with her during the tour, his recounting of Ratti's pitiable story and his own role in her fall from grace have all been rendered in the third person without the usual paraphernalia attendant on the stream of consciousness technique. But in etching the character of Ravi and in describing the various disparate forces acting upon his psyche Naveen uses a number of narrative techniques one flowing into another according to the demands of the context and maintains the forward momentum of the story and gives us in the process the feeling of a flow that cannot be bound.

The writer shows two kinds of hunger in this novel in the most brilliant way. Hunger instigates people to endure humiliation, stealing, slavery and cruelty. Resisting these temptations is the hallmark of individuality and Ravi is capable of it. His teacher Upendra enlightens him on the difference between ideals and actual life and the difference between thoughts and deeds. Upendra's words gave life to his



self-confidence. He has his mother in his heart and the unattainable Kiranmayi outside delineating the limits of his psyche. He operates within these limits. But it is not difficult to understand that he progresses from his initial loneliness and withdrawal towards the society of men and the security it offers. This clearly comes out in the last part of the novel.

The very title indicates that life for them is not a bed of roses but a punishing experience of injuries caused by sharp instruments, namely difficulties, disappointments and compromises. The young men find themselves, even before life has formally begun in a suspended state, between life and death. Naveen makes an honest effort in this novel to identify and expose the forces acting upon these young men, directly and indirectly, and rendering them incapable of taking on life with confidence, hope and enthusiasm. It is not difficult to identify these forces. By 1968 the great hopes raised in the immediate consequences of the Independence on the economic, cultural and social fronts were dashed to the ground.

The painful realization dawned on the people that life after Independence would be not much different from what it had been before. Especially the young people realised that it would be a mere illusion to keep poverty at bay by obtaining a university degree and finding a job therewith. Ravi becomes the focal point of this disappointment with life in the novel. There is a silent cry and protest of Ravi throughout the novel at the inability of the young men to reconcile the values useful to the continuation of the greater good of family and society, the high ideals concerning the progress of mankind and human relations with the realities which are bitter and ugly.

There is also an implied suggestion in the novel to the young men and women not to waste their time on merely agonizing over a non-existent ideal order and the impossibility of creating an ideal order but to lay, through collective effort and struggle, a path which is free of barriers and which will lead them to the attainment of individual and collective progress.

As the novelist activates his own sentiments to place the inner world of his protagonist, full of infuriated emotions, uncontrolled thoughts and

feelings, the language too matches the speed of their occurrence. The reader is made to race along the thoughts of the protagonist for which the language helps him in a number of ways.

Naveen's diction and style matches the subject matter and enhances its artistic appeal. Humour also plays an important role in Ampasayya making it all the more interesting. Ravi, for example, even as he goes through several hardships, can still laugh at himself. He can cast his own doubts and find answers to them provoking a smile on reader's lips. Another technique which provokes gentle laughter in the novel is the way Naveen uses familiar words and expressions imparting special meanings to them, and that too often repetitively.

The application of stream of consciousness technique makes it crucial to honestly represent thoughts and feelings of the characters. This runs the risk of the narrative deteriorating into offensiveness. In Ampasayya there are many instances which could be cited in this context as Upendra explains:

"There is no relationship between the dreams of our student days and the experience of real life now. While students we dream of a glorious future. We imagine life to be a wonderful experience. But we don't have a clear idea of life. Something happens in our life." (p 146)

But it all depends on how one takes it. Naveen understands the inner life of his characters and portrays it honestly and if in the process he has to write about thoughts and feelings which the politically correct writers would rather avoid, he does not hesitate. But Naveen believes that the thought process of a person is dictated by environmental determinism and the person concerned is not at fault for allowing his mind to entertain obscene thoughts and the writer for recording them on paper.

Ampasayya also enjoys the rare distinction of being the first Telugu novel to portray a homosexual character Gurnadham. Ravi has a tough time staying away and despises the advances of this character who is a fellow boarder in the university hostel. No Telugu writer prior to Ampasayya creates this character and the writer felt it necessary to create a character of this sexual orientation.



In the run of the mill novels Ravi's friendship with Kiranmayi would have blossomed into a full-blown love affair with all the excitements, anxieties and difficulties traditionally associated with it. Naveen knows that such love affairs are rare and the successful ones are the rarest.

The love affair, such as it is, ends for Ravi when he realizes that he has no money to buy cinema tickets for Kiranmayi and her friends. And for Kiranmayi herself it has never been an idea worth giving a second thought to. It is possible that it never occurred to her that she might be in love with Ravi or he might be in love with her. She just goes away from the cinema hall when her Calcutta fiancé comes to fetch her away, leaving everyone, especially Ravi, greatly disappointed. Kiranmayi lives mostly in the daydreams of Ravi. She is a mere mirage, a phantom, to be idolized and worshiped but never attained. He knows only too well that his social and economic status does not permit him the luxury of a wife of Kiranmayi's background. Although he dreams a lot about Kiranmayi, he does not worry over her loss. Perhaps he has never even loved her.

CONCLUSION

Naveen has repeatedly said that unless a real life incident inspires him he does not write stories and novels. The experiences of Ravi are certainly similar to those of Naveen when he was studying Economics at Osmania University in the early sixties. This autobiographical element lends realism to the novel. The story and every one of the characters in Ampasayya are realistic to the core. Ampasayya is as popular and influential as it always has been. Its appeal to readers, especially the readers in the age group of 20 to 30 years, is fascinating. It is true that the circumstances of life depicted in this novel have considerably changed but the universality of emotions, feelings, loves, hatreds and the workings of the mind to be found in Ampasayya makes it immortal. It joined the honoured list of the Telugu literary classics a long time ago and it will surely remain there forever.

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