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Gangavva mattu Gangamayi: A Domestic Novel

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Dr. Shankar Mokashi-Punekar (1928-2004) was a man of multiple interests and achievements. He was a bilingual writer who has written both in Kannada and in English, in addition to being a Sanskrit scholar. The range of his interests is indeed stunning. He has written poetry, fiction, literary criticism and music criticism in English. Besides, he was an accomplished translator also. It is unfortunately not possible to discuss here even in brief the multifarious achievement of his rich talent. I, therefore, confine my attention to his first novel in Kannada, namely *Gangavva mattu Gangamayi* (*Gangavva and River Ganga*, 1956). His second novel *Avadheshwari*, a political novel about Vedic times was published in 1987 and awarded the Central Sahitya Academy Award in 1988.

Mokashi-Punekar has great respect for Indian (Hindu) life and culture. Though a student and teacher of English Literature, he has never yielded to the temptation of copying or adopting the foreign themes or techniques in his writings. He rightly believes in the depiction of purely native life of Karnataka (and therefore of India) without in any way modelling it upon the Western counterpart. It is this purity of nativity that appeals to us when we read the novels like V.K.Gokak's *Samarasave Jivana* (*Harmony of Life*), Kuvempu's *Kanuru Subbamma Heggaditi* (*Duchess Subbamma of Kanuru*), Basavaraj Kattimani's *Swatantryadedege* (*Towards Freedom*), Nagegowda's *Nannuru* (*My Village*) and S.L.Bhyrappa's *Datu* (*Crossing Over*). There are a few others novels in Kannada like U.R.Anantamurty's *Samskara* and *Avasthe*, P.Lankesh's *Biruku*, Giri's *Gati-Sthiti* and Chittal's *Shikari*, which have been written under the foreign i.e. Russian, European and American influences and which do not easily appeal to the Indian reader, who has not read or heard about their foreign counterparts. Mokashi-Punekar's *Gangavva mattu Gangamayi*, obviously, belongs to the former group of fiction of pure nativity.

Gangavva mattu Gangamayi is a very significant domestic novel about northern Karnataka. It deals with the conflict between two brahmin families and the consequent misunderstanding and rivalry between the two. The setting goes on alternating between a village called Bindagol and a district place called Dharwad. The novel begins with the rivalry between Gangavva, a widow and her own brother Raghappa. Her bitterness is caused by her feeling that Raghappa was responsible for her husband's loss of landed property and therefore for his ultimate death. Being deeply disappointed by the loss of her husband, she has no wish other than seeing her eighteen year old Kitti married and visiting the city of Kashi once before her death. Accordingly she joins the group of other pilgrims of her neighbourhood and goes to Kashi, where like all her companions, she dips into the River Ganga, has a *darsan* of Lord Viswanatha and collects a pot of holy water of the Ganga. Her disappointment with life is so deep that she does not find any charm in living further. She is obsessed with the idea of death. She, therefore, throws away the holy water of the Ganga through the window of the train while returning from

Kashi. This act, which is tantamount to sacrilege, is symptomatic of her deep-seated frustration in life. Now that she has decided to die, all that she has to do is to postpone it until her son is married. Although Kitti is promoted as a clerk in the Revenue Office, his salary is not adequate for maintaining the family. Gangavva, therefore, has to skim through her limited money and keep the pot boiling. She has been patiently waiting for the son's marriage.

It is at this juncture that Raghappa, the inimical brother enters into Gangavva's life again. Her desire to keep Raghappa away from her family is frustrated by the exigency of her son's life. Kitti is constantly advised by his mother to shun the company of Raghappa. But Kitti's dullness and the consequent unpopularity in the Revenue Office make it inevitable for him to depend upon Raghappa, who can use his influence on the Mamledar and make him favourably disposed towards Kitti. As Kitti wants the favour of the authorities in his office and as he needs Raghappa's help for that, he has to go against his own mother's injunctions by befriending his maternal uncle. Innocent as he is, Kitti cannot understand the ulterior motives behind Raghappa's friendship for him. Raghappa's intention is, obviously, to achieve a double success through a single task. He wants to have Kitti as his son-in-law so that he can not only be free from anxiety about his daughter's marriage but through that he can take revenge upon his sister i.e. Gangavva. Kitti, because of his youthful innocence and helplessness, fails to see through Raghappa's diplomatic behaviour. Raghappa weans Kitti to himself stage by stage in a calculated manner. He, for example, invites Kitti and the Mamledar to his house to attend a musical recital by his mistress Mehubjan and introduces Kitti to his official boss i.e. Mamledar. Later Raghappa influences the Mamledar in such a way that the latter begins to take interest in Kitti and treats him favourably in the office. Kitti really feels grateful to Raghappa for this turn of luck. But Gangavva feels humiliated at her son's playing into the hands of Raghappa. The story does not end there. Raghappa is clever enough to brainwash Kitti in a very systematic manner. Kitti, who is a young man, has his natural attraction for Ratna, daughter of Raghappa whom he meets occasionally and secretly decides to marry her. But the only hindrance is his mother. He knows that his mother cannot give her consent to that marriage. Raghappa, who is bent upon having Kitti as his son-in-law pretentiously requests Gopalarao Desai to bring pressure upon Gangavva to agree for the alliance. Compelled by these circumstances, she gives her consent for the marriage between Kitti and Ratna. Now her humiliation is complete, but still she decides to bear it in the interest of her son. She teaches a lesson to Raghappa by holding up the wedding ceremony until he paid the full amount of dowry for his daughter. Raghappa is able to get out of this emergency only with the unexpected economic help offered by his mistress Mehubjan. Although she has surrendered to the situation rather helplessly, she does not forget her rancour towards Raghappa. She, therefore, changes her mode of revenge by never stepping into Raghappa's house though he has now become Kitti's father-in-law. The story would have ended here if Kitti had no economic problems. Kitti with his meagre salary finds it very difficult to maintain the family and to clear the debt incurred on the wedding expenditure. Raghappa again enters into the situation and tries to exploit it. He suspects that Gangavva has deposited some money with Gopalarao Desai and instigates Kitti to ask part of that money from Desai. But Gangavva and Desai decide not to yield to Kitti, as they know that Raghappa is bent on harassing them.

Whereas in the first half of the novel, Raghappa's attention is concentrated on Gangavva, in the second half, is directed towards Gopalarao Desai. Kitti, of course, helplessly acts as his medium. When Raghappa's ego is hurt by Desai's adamancy in not giving the money to Kitti, he

decides to take revenge upon Desai by cultivating the latter's son Vasantarao. He invites Vasantarao to his house and attracts him by arousing his interest in drama and encourages him to start a professional drama-company. He finally instigates him to ask his share of property from his father i.e. Desai. Under the influence of Raghappa, Vasantarao begins to sell the cereals stealthily and keeps away from the father. But Gopal Rao Desai comes to know all about him through the villagers and rightly guesses that Raghappa is behind it all. When Vasantarao actually asks his father for the share of his property, he is simply slapped and silenced by the father. Vasantarao's helplessness before his father humiliates Raghappa further. Stung by this, Raghappa tries his last weapon by weaning Vasantarao towards his own second daughter, Shanta. A romantic youth as he is, Vasantarao yields to the temptation and begins to meet Shanta as often as possible. Gopal Rao Desai, who is touched to the quick by Raghappa's adamant interference into his family matters, decides finally to teach Raghappa a lesson of his life, by trying to expose his role in Achyuta's property-litigation. The novelist shows the reverse picture of life from consequence to cause and keeps up the element of suspense in the novel.

It is true that Raghappa had promised (however pretentiously though it might be) Gangavva that he would adopt her son Kitti in course of time. That was the reason why Gangavva had consented to the marriage, though rather half-heartedly. Raghappa's cunningness prevents him from keeping up his promise to Gangavva. He is waiting for some pretext or the other. Now he suddenly remembers that he could as well have his own son if luck favours him. His ambition impels him to ignore the well being of his wife Champakka. In spite of the doctor's advice to his wife to avoid pregnancy on account of her weakness, Raghappa decides to father a son on her. Consequently she conceives in the old age of fifty or so. So far Raghappa has led a life of cunning and arrogance, but according to the law of balance in life, his luck turns for the worse. He, like a tragic hero, has got to have his hubris. He has already lost his favourite mistress Mehbubjan, who died of the strain she had to undergo for the money she got from the Manager of the Drama Company in order to pay at least partially for the dowry for Ratna's marriage. That was the first blow to Raghappa. Then he loses his wife Champakka also, who dies in delivery giving birth to a stillborn baby. That is the second blow to him. Vasantarao, whom Raghappa had encouraged to fall in love with Shanta, takes the earliest opportunity of robbing her of her virginity. That is the third blow to Raghappa. These three great shocks take away all the pride of Raghappa. Simultaneously Gopal Rao Desai's threat to expose Raghappa's mischief in Venkati's litigation concerning the landed property adds up to his helplessness. Raghappa, therefore, has no wish to continue to live. Consequently he ends his life by hanging himself in his house at night.

Now that her enemy Raghappa is punished by life, Gangavva reconciles herself to her lot with a sense of resignation. Raghappa's suicide preceded by many unhappy events in his life is eloquent of the law of life, which restores the balance by punishing the wicked and protecting the virtuous. The circle has run its full course now. Gangavva borrows a small bowl of Ganga-water from a pilgrim from Benaras and keeps it in the niche of God. Her throwing away the Ganga-water at the beginning of the novel and her reception of the same at the end bracket the innumerable events in-between and symbolize the loss and restoration of moral order respectively. The author's didactic intention is more than fulfilled. The novel obviously, shows the meaningfulness of human life in spite of the element of evil in it. It enhances the reader's faith in life by portraying the essential moral behind the apparent existential disorder. It has the depth, if not the width of an epic. It easily invites comparison with the other epic novels in

Kannada like *Kanuru Subbamma Heggaditi*, *Malegalalli Madumagalu* and *Gramayana* etc. The apologetic tone in which the author calls his novel a 'traditional' one is not justified because as the author himself is very much aware, what is important in the creation of literature is not the traditional or the radical theme, but the sincerity with which the theme is treated. No sensible reader can miss the element of sincerity in *Gangavva mattu Gangamayi*.

The technique of the novel is conventional in that it conforms to the omniscient method of narration. As the author himself has confessed, he was influenced by Masti in this respect. Mokashi-Punekar's characterization is marked by a psychological inwardness. The physical and social details are kept to a minimum. He, for example, offers a very clear picture of the motives behind the behaviour of his characters. Kitti's growth from innocent helplessness to powerful popularity in the office, Gangavva's alertness and adamancy, Raghappa's calculated cunningness and vindictiveness, Gopalarao Desai's dignity and poise and Vasantarao's romantic adventures are all portrayed in a very realistic and convincing manner. The narration has no leisureliness of *Kanuru Subbamma* or *Gramayana* and the like. On the contrary, it is a rapid one. There is no conscious attempt at offering a vivid picture of either the village Bindagol or the city Dharwad. It must be noticed that his characterization is sometimes truncated by his puritanical inhibition as, for example, when he refers to Kitti's rendezvous with a prostitute, he offers only a string of vague words rather than visualizing the physicality of experience or when he dismisses the seduction of Shanta by Vasantarao in half a sentence or so.

Though *Gangavva mattu Gangamayi* deals with the family feuds caused by blood relation and property matters, it succeeds in giving us a glimpse of the contemporary Karnataka society of the forties, like for example, the popular interest in the professional Theatre (an object of common interest for Raghappa and Vasantarao); the relationship between art and professional prostitution (Mehbubjan, who is a professional actress is also a mistress of Raghappa and accepted as such by the members of his family); the shameless atrocities of the Revenue Department (Joshi Ramaraya the Revenue clerk initiating Kitti into immoral habits like acceptance of bribes and practice of fornication); the moral hold of the elders (Bahaddur Desai protecting the interests of Gangavva) show the picture of a North-Karnataka district in the forties of nineteenth century. The events like Gandhi's Salt March to Dandi and Achyuta's participation in it hold a mirror to the contemporary India of the forties.

The authorial interference in the omniscient narration is another traditional feature in the novel, which is inspired by Galaganatha in Kannada and perhaps Scott, Dickens and George Eliot in English. Now he reminds us of what has happened in the past, now he apologizes for interference, now he shows his love for a particular character in the novel.

The language of the novel captures the raciness, pithiness and crudeness of North Karnataka, especially Dharwad district dialect with a brahmanical slant. It is occasionally beautified by poetic and philosophical observations and studded with Sanskrit tags and quotations. The racy brahmanical dialect of *Gangavva mattu Gangamayi* foreshadows that of *Gramayana* and is quite readable unlike the dialects of Dyavanuru Mahadeva's *Odalala* and Chennanna Walikar's *Belya*.

* *Gangavva mattu Gangamayi*, by Shankar Mokashi-Punekar, Dharwad: Manohar Grantha Prakashana Samiti, 1956.