GENDETHIMMA

*Clouds hold the water drawn from the ocean,
but it is the clouds to which people look.*

– Jnaneshwar

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Srikrishna Alanahally
GENDETHIMMA
(Parasangada Gendethimma)

Translated from the Kannada original by
P. P. GIRIDHAR

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First published in Kannada in 1974

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First published in 1998

MACMILLAN INDIA LIMITED

Chennai Jaipur Patna Mumbai

Bangalore Bhopal Chandigarh Coimbatore

Cuttack Guwahati Hubli Hyderabad Lucknow

Madurai Nagpur Trivandrum Visakhapatnam

Associated companies throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-92330-6 ISBN 978-1-349-15121-9 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-15121-9

Typeset at Joan Integrated Services, Chennai 600 020

Cover picture coordination: The Gallery, Chennai 600 006

Published by

Rajiv Beri for Macmillan India Limited,

21 Patullos Road Chennai 600 002

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if these translations help to widen the literary horizons of our readers even slightly, they would not have been published in vain.

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MINI KRISHNAN
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When Mrs MR. Omayal Achi and her son Mr MR. Arunachalam died in an air crash on 12 October 1976, the considerable fortune they left behind was converted into the MR. Omayal Achi MR. Arunachalam Trust by their heirs.

Mr A.M.M. Arunachalam is the Managing Trustee, and his three sisters the Founding Trustees of the Trust, the chief functions of which are education and health care in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India. The Omayal Achi College of Nursing, Tamil Nadu is also run by the Trust.

Later, a separate body was established called the MR. AR. Educational Society which set up the MR. Arunachalam Vocational Training Centre and the Selva Vinayakar Middle School, all in rural areas. The aims of the Society besides literacy, also include the promotion of Indian literature and scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

Srikrishna Alanahally's early death at the age of forty-two deprived Kannada literature of a highly promising and gifted writer. He began his literary career as a poet and published his first collection of poems *Mannina Hadu* (Songs of the Earth) when he was barely nineteen. The book carried an introduction by Gopalakrishna Adiga who led the modernist movement in Kannada and was an immediate success. Alanahally published two more collections of poetry and a book of translations on Dogri love poems but he will be remembered chiefly for his two collections of short stories, *Tapta* (1970) and *Phoenix* (1974) and the three novels, *Kadu* (1971), *Parasangada Gendethimma* (1974) and *Bhujangayyana Dashavataragalu* (1982). As I have argued elsewhere, the Kannada novel has developed, in its evolution during the last hundred years or so, with two distinctive characteristics. First, an overwhelming involvement in the process of modernisation begun by our encounter with the West and second, an internal debate within Kannada culture, between nature, understood in its primary sense, as well as human nature, and refinement between Desi and Marga in its literary manifestation. This is as true of pre-Independence writers like K.V. Puttappa and Shivaram Karanth as it is of post-Independence writers like U.R. Anantha Murthy, Poornachandra Tejaswi and Srikrishna Alanahally. Looked at in its totality, Alanahally's fiction reveals two major concerns: the qualities generated by the conflict between tradition and modernity and the role of sexuality in human life.

Salman Rushdie's observation that ours is an age of the city is not entirely valid in the Indian context where most of the writers have had their roots in villages. Alanahally's strength as a novelist lies in his capacity to grasp the complexity of the

changing rural life which he knew first hand and articulating it in authentic and evocative language. One of the ironies of human civilisation is that though man has travelled a long way in his research for refinement his basic instincts — sex, hatred, hunger and cruelty — remain unchanged. This is the controlling theme of Alanahally's first novel *Kadu* (Forest) which has been widely translated and turned into an award-winning film. Though the temporal setting of the novel is modern, the action arising from the rivalry between Chandregowda and Shivaganga belonging to two neighbouring villages is characterised by the play of primitive passions. The world of the novel, presented from the point of view of an adolescent child is a demonic world where violence is not an aberration but a way of life.

Parasangada Gendethimma (Gendethimma: Teller of Tales) (1974) is Alanahally's second novel and in the opinion of several informed critics his most mature work in fiction. Though the novel is named after Gendethimma, Maranki the woman he marries is as much at the centre as he is. In fact it is Maranki who symbolizes the dual theme of the novel, the process of modernisation in the rural context and the emergence of female sexuality. In Maranki, Alanahally has created a new image of woman, not as a passive object as in *Kadu* but as a gendered subject who plays the role of an active agent.

On one level the novel can be read as the story of how the city and its values penetrate a remote and tradition-bound village like Gauwally and initiate far-reaching changes in the lives of its residents. On another level it is the presentation of the power of female sexuality and the fear and hostility it arouses in men and women alike. Alanahally's attitude to modernity, like Chinua Achebe's in *Things Fall Apart*, is ambivalent. He accepts the slow and inevitable disintegration of the old order with its agrarian values but he genuinely cherishes some of the values themselves, for instance the traditional hospitality which the Malegowda family extends to Gendethimma in spite of the fact that he belongs to a lower caste. Another example is the way in which Sannaputtappa holds Salundi together by his wisdom and role as peace-maker.

Geography plays an important role in the novel. The three villages, Salundi, Gauwally and Ulimavu which figure in the story are qualitatively different from each other. Salundi is on the Mysore-Manandawadi road and has regular contacts with the city. Ulimavu is situated in the proximity of Nanjangud and is exposed to urban influences. Mahadevanaika's status as a peon in the Nanjangud temple, the neat uniform he wears and the movies he takes her to are a source of irresistible attraction for Maranki. Between the two, Salundi appears to be more tradition-bound. Gauwally, built in a low-lying area and enveloped in darkness, is a remote agricultural village where, in the absence of roads, the bullock cart is the main mode of transport and barter economy still prevails. All the three villages maintain their age-old caste structure but the caste rivalry evident in *Kadu* is not noticeable in *Parasangada Gendethimma*. The fight between the two groups of Gendethimma and Kala is a fight between members of the same community.

Gendethimma, a resident of Salundi, comes from a modest agricultural family belonging to the Parivara caste, one of the lower rungs in the ladder of caste hierarchy in the novel. The land owned by the family is insufficient to maintain the whole family, and Gendethimma being the younger son, has to seek alternative employment, leaving the cultivation of the land to Goolanaika, the elder brother. He becomes an itinerant tradesman, carrying his little shop with him in a large basket, and making weekly visits to Gauwally to sell his wares which are limited to things like betel leaves in the beginning, but later multiplying under Maranki's influence to include cosmetics and items of urban dress like the kind of underwear young women want to make themselves more attractive. Gendethimma's trade, openly conducted as long as it is confined to traditional items which are exchanged for foodgrains, becomes secret and forbidden when it extends to items disapproved by the older people. Gendethimma unwittingly becomes instrumental in creating a rift between the young and the old, threatening the authority of the men and women who traditionally held power in the family. This leads

to his punishment and humiliation by the village court. But the process initiated by Gendethimma for personal profit under the active guidance of Maranki proves to be unstoppable and this — once considered taboo — finds its way freely into rural homes. The most striking example of this development in the novel is the change in the attitude of the highly conservative Malegowda family. Significantly, here too, the initiative comes from the woman. Devirawwa does not want her daughter to marry a man from the village because she personally knows the hardships of village life. Respecting her wishes Malegowda chooses a young man from the city, who is a shopkeeper by profession and not an agriculturist like himself. This is a significant departure from normal practice. Gendethimma's services prove to be invaluable in equipping the bride for life in the city.

x The Gendethimma-Maranki relationship is threatened from its very inception by various forces. It is in many ways an unequal marriage. Maranki is attractive, pleasure-loving and relatively refined in her personal tastes and habits. Gendethimma is honest, hard-working and resourceful but is no match for Maranki either in looks or refinement. The marriage itself is a hasty arrangement by Maranki's father aimed at controlling his daughter's sexual freedom and saving the family from scandal. Initially Gendethimma's family takes pride in Maranki's beauty but soon finds itself threatened by her love of independence and sexual power over Gendethimma. On her part, Maranki thoroughly disapproves of the unclean habits of the family and its total lack of hygiene, and initiates a series of changes. She puts Gendethimma also through a strict regime of improvement. Dogs and poultry which had a free run of the house are chased out. Neem sticks are replaced by the Nanjangud brand of tooth-powder. Windows which had remained closed for years are opened to let in fresh air. But Maranki's well-meant initiatives offend Gendethimma's mother Bediyamma because she reads in them a rejection of her own values and a threat to her supremacy in the house. When Gendethimma for whom Maranki had opened a whole world of new pleasures through

her body begins to support his wife, the entire family rises against Maranki. All her initiatives are frustrated. She is even accused of witchcraft and a village tantrik's help is sought to remove her spell. Matters come to a head when Goolanaika beats her up. Of particular significance is the fact that sexuality plays a decisive role in the entire process.

Unlike Gendethimma for whom family ties were very important, Maranki had had a tenuous relationship with her stepmother and indulgent father and had enjoyed considerable personal freedom. In the new house she and Gendethimma set up in Salundi, she asserts her independence and gives free rein to her desire for improvement. Her modern tastes are fully reflected in the manner in which she furnishes her new house, the most attractive addition being a gramophone which proves to be a nuisance, attracting children and idlers. She encourages her husband to expand his trade by the introduction of fancy goods and often accompanies him to the city to help him select them. But her pride does not allow her to visit Gauwally because she is afraid of indifferent treatment from the superior Okkaliga community to which Malegowda's family belongs.

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Maranki uses her newly won freedom to pursue an intimate relationship with Shivanna, a school teacher in Salundi who also belongs to Ulimavu. Ironically, it is Gendethimma who provides an opportunity for this relationship by asking Shivanna to accompany his wife to her father's place. Maranki has no sense of guilt about this relationship. She thoroughly enjoys it and takes pride in the fact that her beauty has attracted an educated man who belongs to a higher caste. She had discovered the pleasures of sex long before her marriage and had had an admirer in Mahadevanaika with the full knowledge of her family. By nature trusting, Gendethimma does not believe the rumours which some of the villagers begin to spread about Maranki's affair with Shivanna but the truth is forced on him when he returns home unexpectedly from Gauwally and finds them together. The discovery which comes close upon his shaming humiliation by the Gauwally village panchayat, results in his total alienation and suicide.

Gendethimma's violent death shakes Maranki's confidence in herself and forces her to realise how unjust she had been to him. Maranki's lone moral act is her decision to put an end to her own life. All her actions had been controlled by what Lacan calls '*jouissance* of being' and not by moral beliefs. The outstanding merit of the novel is its refusal to take sides and pass facile moral judgements. It finds a tragic situation and presents it in all its ambivalent signification. To adopt the fine phrasing from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Parasangada Gendethimma* is a work of true dialogic imagination. Alanahally admired Rao Bahadur's famous Kannada novel *Gramayana* for its subtle real life situations which generated multiple symbolic meanings throughout its reading.

Mahasweta Devi, the famous Bangla novelist, has said that a sense of history is the primary condition of being a writer. Alanahally had this historical sense in abundant measure. *Parasangada Gendethimma* has an unmistakable and well-documented historical context. Set in the early years of the post-independence era, the novel recreates a whole way of life, its ethos and beliefs, festivals and folklore, its caste structure and village economy. It is difficult to choose specific instances from the rich texture of the novel but three episodes carrying special significance need to be commented upon. The first of these is the drunken night scene which forms part of the final day's celebration of Maranki's marriage in Salundi. The description of this scene (pp. 17-19) which could have come straight out of Petronius, is a revealing commentary on the sexual mores of the community, particularly those of the Ulimavu guests, which helps us to see Maranki's sexual behaviour in perspective. The second relates to the religious practices of the Gauwally people which include the calling of Shani by Kada in which the entire rural community participates, cutting across caste barriers. The episode (pp. 118-120) is fully integrated into the main narrative and Alanahally makes use of it to articulate the processes of Gendethimma's troubled mind — the tensions caused by rumours about Maranki and Shivanna and their release through magic. The last episode is the court scene in Gauwally (pp 149-155)

which finally breaks Gendethimma's spirit. Unlike Maranki who is totally amoral, Gendethimma has a strong sense of morality. He knows that the severity of the punishment he receives is undeserved but is fully aware of his own wrongdoing though he ascribes it to Maranki's influence. The complexity of the situation is further reflected in the motives of Gendethimma's accusers who come from different communities in the village. The strongest attack comes from Motamma who narrates how her sons have been enticed away from her by the daughters-in-law and how she is reduced helplessness in her own house, all because of the aphrodisiac power of Gendethimma's secret wares. She demands heavy punishment for him and succeeds in getting it. Malegowda sympathises with Gendethimma — his own family has sought Gendethimma's help in connection with Rathni's marriage — but he is helpless against the decision of the village elders and remains a silent witness to Gendethimma's humiliation.

Parasangada Gendethimma marks the beginning of Alanahally's turning away from the closed poetic form which he had practised to perfection in *Kadu* and a movement towards the more open epic structure. It also signifies the initiation of a new phase in the development of the Kannada novel. The epic intention is more fully realised in *Bhujangayyana Dashavataragalu* (The Ten Avatars of Bhujangayya, 1982), Alanahally's last published novel. Among the Kannada novelists, Alanahally shows strong affinities with K.V. Puttappa and Poornachandra Tejaswi whom he reflects in several ways. It is unfortunate that he did not live long enough to match his achievement with theirs. He was too gifted a writer to have stopped with *Bhujangayyana Dashavataragalu*.