

**Fluid Identities in U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Bhava***  
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Thomas Pynchon and John Barth are two eminent post-modern novelists who try to explain or recreate or celebrate the term identity in interesting manner. Now we are celebrating the fragments rather than lamenting on it. We can call this phenomenon as postmodernism. In all fields –art, literature, music, science etc we are trying to break up lineages or the threads or unknowingly it is happening. Everywhere the floating and fluidity is happening rather than firmness and rigidity. Either we can participate in it or observe it in a detached manner. Here U. R. Ananthamurthy, one among the Indian writers who writes on the issue ‘identity’, introduces a group of characters in his works, who are confronting with identity/identities or limbo of identities or bardo\* of identities. Apart from lamenting or celebrating the lost identity they are thinking, questioning and searching for the reasons or causes.

This paper, entitled ‘Fluid Identities in U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Bhava*,’ discusses the question of identity in a different perspective. It discusses whether South Asian literature presenting the identity as double or hybrid or fluid. *Bhava* portrays the identity crisis of modern men, in the true sense of word, who too are unsure who they are while facing many unsolved puzzles of their identity. The novel has the essence of all those modern or postmodern writings where the individuals face agonizing questions about their existence, identity and their very place in the world and these questions result neither from societal indifference and apathy nor from any spiritual void but from their own actions.

The term ‘identity’ starts to taunt/haunt the ‘intellectuals’ from the period in which human civilisation starts to flourish. But still we are discussing or trying to unravel the term identity. It is quite interesting. In all literature one or another way the issue of identity become a central attention, knowingly or unknowingly. It is damn sure that till the decline of human civilisation we have to talk/think about identity, whether we interested or not. In Indian literature apart from U. R. Ananthamurthy so many writers discussed and still discussing the term ‘identity’, for example, Karnard, Kambar, Arundhathi Roy, Rushdie, etc.

Derrida explains the unstableness/fluidity of language and its meaning through language itself. Most of the human situations demand the concept ‘willing suspension of disbelief. It is one of our parts of life. Likewise, even though all of us know define something is not possible or it is a meaningless activity we are forced to do that. So let me quote the definition of identity here. Identity takes its root from the Latin *idem* meaning ‘same’, which implies the state of being or remaining the same under varying aspects or conditions- the condition of being oneself or itself and not another (Ravichandran 3).

‘...state of being or remaining the same under varying aspects or conditions’ - just look at this statement. Is it possible? How can we step into the same river twice? May be because of this, the phrase ‘identity crisis’ is still becomes hero or centre of attention. For being oneself /itself, we have to control ourselves. But how far is it possible? Is it mere an illusion or practicality? U. R. Ananthamurthy beautifully presents these questions in all works, and here I have chosen his fourth novel *Bhava* to discuss o behalf of the term ‘fluid identity.’

U. R. Ananthamurthy, a teacher of English literature and one of India’s leading contemporary writers, does all his creative writing in Kannada. Author of five novels, including the widely acclaimed *Samskara*, he has six collection of short stories, five collection of poems, a play, and sixteen volumes of critical writings. He was vice-chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala and president of Central Sahitya Academy. His, presently chosen, novel *Bhava* carries the central philosophical idea, ‘being and becoming.’

In this novel he is presenting the story of three generations- Viswanatha Shastri, Dinakar and Prasad. The common thread is one or other way they are searching for their identity both worldly and spiritually. For the sake of analysis, we can broadly divide the whole characters into two groups- one is entangled with their parentage, relationships and hereditary; and other is observing all those worldly ‘mayas’ in a detached manner. They live in this ‘bhava’ without being of it.

When the novel opens, we can see two eminent personalities/identities- Shastri, a Kirtanakar and Dinakar, a famous persona in TV shows- travelling in train. The amulet, which is hanging on Dinakar’s neck made Shastri to regurgitate about his forty years before rough and rude past, because the amulet resembles the amulet of his first wife Saroja, whom he killed because of the trust issue regarding her pregnancy.

He began sweating and trembling so badly that he could not open the cover of the box. His eyes kept staring at the amulet, trying to comprehend the sign that teased him like a riddle (Ananthamurthy 5)

He doubted Karunakara Pundit, who helped the couple to solve their child issue. The amulet of Dinakar appears both good and bad omen to Shastri. In one way it is a relief for his guilty conscience regarding the murder of Saroja and other thought regarding the parentship of Dinakar, because the second marriage of shastri disproved his impotency. But he is reaching an interesting conclusion.

Shastri found himself desiring to address Dinakar as Putani, his dear child, but the endearment stuck in his throat. ‘What if he is the son of Pundit, what if he is that prostitute’s son?’ (17)

His well-shaped nostrils, the colour of his large eyes, the attractiveness of his indifferent gaze- these were so like Saroja's that Shastri, recognizing this, was thunderstruck. A deep tenderness welled up in him, and even many days later he would call this moment to mind as a way of warding off evil omens (5).

In the case of Dinakar, midst of his journey to Sabarimala for seeking the real self of him, he stopped awhile in Sitamma's house, his foster mother after his mother committed suicide in the river. From there he came to know about Gangu, his first lover from Narayan Tantri, childhood friend of him and also Narayan's relationship with Gangu also. Narayan's first wife died, and, in that relationship, he is having a son, Gopal. Gangu is taking care of that child. He decided to marry Gangu and he reveals the truth behind the birth of Gangu's son Prasad to Dinakar.

Never mind. Gangu was four or five months gone in pregnancy, the baby inside her had begun to kick, and again she kept after me that she wanted to abort. Then one night, as I was lying beside her, she began to sob and tell me of the affair between you and her. "I don't know whether this child is yours, it could just as well be his," she said. "Leave me if you don't like me," she said, and kept on sobbing (88)

The highness of Narayan's thought shakes Dinakar and he himself get rid off his own mystery of birth and parentage.

Suddenly I thought, "What does it matter if the child is mine? What does it matter if it is Dinakar's? It is still a child that is floating and growing in her womb. Let it be born and let it grow. I will believe that it is mine." (89)

The second group -Chandrappa, the 'husband' of Gangu, Radha, a prostitute from low caste, soulmate of Shastri and Sitamma, mother of Narayan Tantri- are able to overcome this 'bhava.' Even though they are floating in different identities because of the demands of different life situations, they are able to look at it in a 'vairagya' manner. They are maintaining a detachment to all these happenings.

Shastri- not able to fix his self with Radha but he is having a warm relation with her till the end of his life, and not with Saroja because of trust issue regarding her pregnancy, and also towards his second wife Mahadevi because their daughter eloped with Charvak a Shudra. He is entangled with all these things. He is not able to fix his identity -as a lover, husband, father, and friend, companion etc- neither according to the norms of society nor with his inner callings. Dinakar is also entangled with his relationships -with lovers, his wife, friend, son etc. - and fate- his birth, parentage. He tries to unravel all his complicated thoughts, dilemmas, doubts, mysteries through unsent letters. Prasad- in first he is also disturbed with his mother's affair with Narayan and Chandrappa (husband- in front of society). But he decided to seek the path of sanyasa for knowing himself. His decision is a full-fledged flow towards 'becoming.'

Shastri and Dinakar float with their fluid identities in worldly level but Prasad decides to float in some higher level maybe we can call it a spiritual level. Here ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ is taunting everyone. They want to become something but they are not sure about their finishing points and ultimate goal. May be we can say they are in their transitional stage- a stage as one who has lost his old-world and not yet found another. The two men at the centre of the tale- Sastri and Dinaka- long for relief from uncertainty and anxiety. Their unsettled state of being is signalled by the fact that, when we first encounter them, both wear costumes at odds with their inner lives. Despite the traditional garb of Puranic (Shastri) and pilgrim (Dinakar), each is acutely aware of the discrepancy between public perception and inner reality and also feels something of a hypocrite. Both have been caught in a ghostly transitional limbo, like the bardo or in between state of Tibetan tradition. ‘Bhava’ is also for U. R. Ananthamurthy a selected form of ‘bhavavali,’ the Jain cycle of death and rebirth- which unless escaped is an endless chain of becoming.

Here we can see the characters who are in between the being and becoming. They are struggling with their essence and existence. They are not able to fix their identities. Even though they are trying to control or shape their identities or existence their effort end up in vain. Almost all the characters of Ananthamurthy are the part of this game or bhavavali- Pranesacharya in Samskara, Jagannatha in Bharathipura, Krishnappan in Avasthe. The readers are not able to see clearly or author himself didn’t declare the characters becoming or fond out or fix their real identity. The Writer explains only the state of being ‘in between’, and their fluid identities. All novels of Ananthamurthy are open ended and the characters are not stereotypes. He is giving more freedom to readers than the first reader. May be that is the beauty of his works. Even though the heroes of Ananthamurthy is not enough courageous to break the systems openly and bring revolutionary movements in society, they are free from the illusion of control and they are floating. They are developing a state of mind to accept the happenings as it is.

All of us one or other time has to face or often face and become a part of this fluidity or transitional psyche. That is the beauty of his characters. Maybe we can call them ‘protean men’<sup>1\*</sup> of Ananthamurthy. The term Identity in the postmodern context is fluid. Fluidity connotes an ability to move and change shape on the slightest pressure. So, we can hope that Ananthamurthy’s protean men will fix their identity accordance to their inner thoughts and questioning rather than outer stress (systems and society). So, we can look at these fluid identities as a progress or development or journey with human values, which is completely vanished now a day, to a higher level or becoming.

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<sup>1</sup> Proteanman: - provided by Erikson and Robert Jay Lifton, helps identify the fluid personality. This word came from Greek Mythology from a character’s name proteaus. Proteaus knows the past, present and the future of all things. In order to avoid having to tell the truth, he used his ability to change his shape with relative ease and assumed the pseudo identities of animals and elements of nature. But what he did find difficult and wouldn’t do unless seized and chained, was to commit himself to a single form, the form most of his own, and carry out his function of prophecy.

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