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Dhiruben Patel's *Agantuk*: A Critical Appreciation

Rajesh V. Basiya, Ph.D.

Dhiruben Patel



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Dhiruben Patel's *Agantuk* - A Critical Appreciation

Dhiruben Patel was conferred the prestigious *Kendriya Sahitya Akademy Award* for her novel *Agantuk* in 2002. She has been a prolific writer in Gujarati Literature. Dhiruben was born in Baroda on 29th May 1926. She has achieved an outstanding position in modern Gujarati literature. She has been given a creditable position in the history of Gujarati novel. She also served as the President of the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad. She was also given the highest meritorious award for Gujarati literature *Ranjitram Suwarnachandrak* in 1983. She contributed in all genres of literature. She has written short stories, novels, plays, and poems.

Agantuk



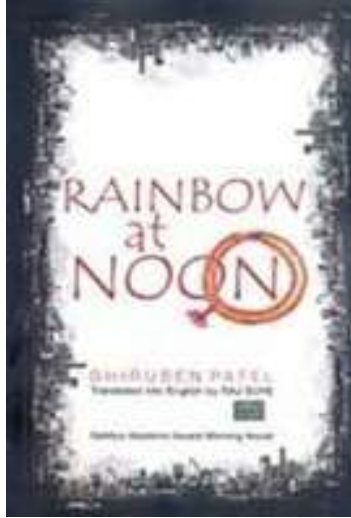
Agantuk was published in 1996. This is an excellent novel by Dhiruben Patel. Suhasini Mulay, an award winning documentary film maker, is producing and directing a tele-film called *Agantuk*, commissioned by the Central Government and this is scheduled to be a bilingual (Hindi and Gujarati) mini-series based on this novel. *Agantuk* is the story of a person striving to gain a spiritual high. This sincerity and purity makes him a misfit in modern society and he becomes an *agantuk*-chance-visitor/traveller/unknown person. The novel has been translated into English by Shri Raj Supe titled *Rainbow at Noon*.

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Dhiruben has imagined a unique situation in this novel: ‘What can happen if a Sanyasin (recluse) comes back after fifteen years of renunciation?’ In the prologue of this novel, Dhiruben narrates, “*Roshnithi Zalhalta khandman jameli mahefilman baharna andhkarmathi udine aavelun ek pakshi ek bariethi praveshi biji bariethi nikali jay etlasamayni aa vat.*” (A bird coming from the darkness of the outside enters a room full of light and festivity; it enters from a window and exits from another window. This is the only spin of the story.)

A Story of Spiritual Journey

This novel won the *Darshak Foundation Award* in 1995 and it was given the most prestigious *Central Academy Award* in 2002. This novel attracts all people. It is appreciated by all. It is the story of the spiritual journey of the protagonist, Ishan. He is a young man, and has a Bachelor’s degree. After the death of his mother, Ishan goes to an Ashram in Uttarkashi and trusts him. He desired that after his death, Ishan should be made the head of the Ashram. But when Omkargiri is no more, an ashram fellow Pratapgiri plots to become the head through intrigue. Ishan is truly religious. He has no ambitions, and he leaves both the Ashram and the Sanyasa. After fifteen years he comes back home to Mumbai. His two brothers Ashutosh and Arnav are suspicious of him when they see him. They exhibit no warmth in receiving him. Their wives Reema and Shalmali do not like his coming back.

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Ishan realizes that Ashutosh-Reema and Arnav-Shalmali are not interested in him. Still he is not disturbed. He decides to get settled somewhere else. As he is truly religious he blames nobody. Of course, Ashutosh has both love and sympathy for his brother but his wife is firm not to keep him with them. Hence Ashutosh sends him to Arnav's house. But neither Arnav nor his wife want him in the house. They treat him coldly. They arrange to keep him in the room of their servant Fransis. But Fransis becomes a staunch devotee of Ishan.

Niranjanbhai, a richman lives on the upper floor of the same building. His daughter Ipsita and son Rajat have met Ishan in Uttarkashi in the past. They lived in the same Ashram some years back. So they request him to stay with them in their house. Ishan responds positively. Rajat has been ill. Ishan cures him by repeated prayers. This is taken as a miracle. So many people come to Ishan for Darshana. Now Ashutosh-Reema and Arnav-Shalmali are ready to keep Ishan with them. But Ishan understands the vanities of the world. Niranjanbhai, Ipsita and Rajat really love and respect him. But Ishan is free from all the attachments. Another ashram fellow Somgiri comes to Ishan and requests him to come back to manage the Ashram, as Pratapgiri is not a real hermit. But Ishan persuades him to go back and keep faith in the Guru. Finally he leaves Mumbai and goes to Brindaban to live the life of a real recluse. His journey for eternity continues till the end of the novel.

Presentation of Contrasting Worlds

Agantuk is a good example of Dhiruben's maturity as an author. She has presented two worlds - the world of worldly people and the world of a truly religious man. In this world of worldly people a person like Ishan feels that he is a chance-visitor/traveler/guest- *agantuk*. *Agantuk* is a unique creation in the history of Gujarati Novel. *Agantuk* is a wonderful novel with a spiritual touch. It enjoys a remarkable position in the history of Gujarati Novel.

Presentation of Selfish and Hypocrite Family Relations

On the very first day of the arrival of Ishan from the Ashram of Uttarkashi his selfish brothers show him the cold shoulder. They are not prepared to keep him till he settles in this new life. Dhiruben has exposed the selfishness and hypocrisy of the so called practical man of contemporary society. Ashutosh telephones Arnav and asks him to share this responsibility:

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'Arnav! E aavi gayo chhe!'

'Hen? kevo lage chhe? Shun? kai bolyo-ketlu rahevano chhe, shun karvano chhe?'

'Na. me poochhyun pan nathi.'

'Barabar.'

'Aa kai mara eklani javabdari nathi, samje chhene?'

'Ha, pan tame mota - '

'tethi shun thai gayu ? tu aave chhene?' (Agantuk 07)

(*'Arnav! He has arrived.'*

'Yeah! How does he look? Did he say how long he will stay? What he will do.'

'No. I did not even ask him.'

'Okay.'

'This is not responsibility of mine only.'

'Yes, but as you are the elder brother...-

'So what? Are you coming?')

Guest is God Tradition

In our country we entertain the guest as God. The maxim of 'Athithi devo bhava' (Guest is God) is a tradition in our country. These brothers forget our great Samskara of Atithi devo bhav. Ashutosh directly shows his dislike for Ishan, *'To shun? Tare vichrvun joie. Amari pan kai musibato hoy, amari javabdario hoy...amne fave em chhe ke nahin e tare jovu joiene?'* (Agantuk 17)

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(What? You should see. We also have problems and other responsibilities. You should consider whether it is convenient or not.)

Ishan was not even a guest, he was their brother. The height of selfishness is seen among these so called cultured people when Arnav's wife Shalmali arranges for Ishan to stay with their servant in a small room in their large luxurious flat though they have an extra guest room. But these shameless brothers forcefully invite Ishan to stay with them when Ishan is respected as a miraculous saint and worshipped by people. Ashutosh forces Ishan to come back to his house, because they are interested in prosperity and fame that Ishan will pursue in future:

Ishan, men tara meditation classes mateni badhi taiyari kari nakhi chhe. I will manage the whole show..... I tell you, you will be famous in this city. Ishan, joje to kharo, with proper publicity bhalbhala rustam tane ahin page padta aavshe? (Agantuk 138)

(Ishan! I have completed all the preparations for your meditation classes. I will manage the whole show. I tell you, you will be famous in this city. Ishan! I am sure that due to proper publicity the distinguished personalities will come here and will bow down you.)

Ahin taro evo deluxe Ashram thashe ke na puchho vat. (Agantuk 139)

(A deluxe Ashram will be built for you. It will be so beautiful that even you won't believe it)

Varu, pan pacchi to tare aavij javanu Ishan! Aapnun ghar hoy ne tu bijane tyan rahe te kevan lage... (Agantuk 108)

(Okay, but now come with us, Ishan. We have our own house and you stay at others' house, it looks strange.)

Satire of Contemporary Social Milieu

The Indianness of Dhiruben is seen in her treatment of the credulous and superstitious people of India. They believe in any *Sadhus* and, any fraudulent person can easily impose upon

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them and make them worship him as Guru. The best example of such exposition is R.K. Narayan's novel, *Guide*. Similarly here Ishan has a chance to deceive the people quite easily; they worship him; heap food and other offerings upon him. Dhiruben makes a scathing satire on such so called Swamijis and Babas who cheat the distressed superstitious people. Ishan is surprised to see it:

Aa bapji banvanun bahun agharun nathi. Loko jatjatni pida bhogvata hoy chhe. Doobato manas tarnun jhale em je kai kaho te svikari le. Ek bholpan hoy chhe. Ek shraddha hoy chhe.....koi pan rite aadarpatra bani gayeli vyaktio aa manovyaparno labh lai potanun aasan jamavi dechhe. (Agantuk 120)

(It is not difficult to play the role of a Baba (saint). People have various types of problems. As a drowning man catches a straw, they accept whatever we say. They have innocence and faith. The so called respected people misuse this mentality of the people and make their own position sound.)

The Plot of the Novel

The plot of the novel is straight forward and uncomplicated. The novel is divided into six chapters. The flashback technique is used but it does not take the reader to the spot. It is narrated by the author or presented through the waves of thoughts in the mind of Ishan. Dhiruben is the omniscient author writing in the third person and thus following the traditional and conventional mode of narration.

Chapter one describes Ishan coming back from the Ashram. His brothers show him a cold response. Ishan realizes it and plans to settle somewhere anyhow.

Second Chapter narrates how Ishan understands the real situation. Through flashback Ishan is reminded of his Ashram life and his Guru's preaching. It shows how Pratapgiri's envy and scheming made Ishan leave sanyasi life and the Ashram.

In the following chapter a quarrel is created by Reema in Ashutosh's home. She is not ready yet to keep him. Ashutosh takes Ishan to Arnav's house. By chance Ishan comes into contact with the richman, Niranjambhai and her daughter, Ipsita. Now Ishan's healing touch

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cures bed-ridden Rajat. This miracle establishes him as a great saint. On the other hand, Ashtosh and Arnav have sent a private detective to Uttarkashi to check the matter. He informs them that Pratapgiri made false accusations of theft against Ishan. But here Rajat's health improves. He is saved from death. Ishan becomes a *Chamatkari Baba* - miraculous-saint. Ashutosh-Reema and Arnav- Shalmali are now eager to take Ishan home. People come for his Darshana. This is the climax.

The last chapter presents Somgiri's arrival from the Ashram. He tries to persuade Ishan to come back to the Ashram as the Ashram is in the hands of an evil person. But Ishan, a real hermit is not ready to go. He persuades Somgiri to go back and keep faith in the Guru. Finally, Ishan leaves for Brindaban.

Characterization

Ishan

Ishan is the protagonist. He is the most interesting and impressive character in the novel. The whole novel is simply a presentation of his situation in this worldly world where he seems to be a misfit. He is a young man of about forty. Since childhood he has been very innocent and honest. He took *diksha* and became a sanyasi after the death of his mother. He lives in an Ashram at Uttarkashi in the Himalayas. But after fifteen years he gives up Sanyasi life and comes back to worldly life.

Ishan lives a pious and spiritual life. He meditates, does jaap (recitation) and reads the *Vedas*. He was given a task to translate some religious Sanskrit books. His only aim is to complete the translation work assigned by the late Guru Omkargiri. Ishan returns to Mumbai after fifteen years. But now he is not a Sanyasi and he has no job and shelter. He lives like Trishanku in Hindu mythology:

*Ishanne Trishanku yaad aavyo. Ene jo Vyomma koik jagya mali shaki to
potane pan dharti upar koik jagya mali raheshe. Ishware nischit kari j hashe.
Shodhviye nahi pade. Eni mele j mali raheshe. (Agantuk 25)*

(Ishan was reminded of Trishanku. As Trishanku was given some place in the sky, he will also be spared some space on the earth. It will definitely be arranged by God. He will not have to find it. It will come to him itself.)

Trishanku and Other Metaphors

Trishanku is a character from Sanskrit mythology. He was a king. Due to a curse he was placed in an impossible position of hanging in mid-air. It is also a state of neither here nor there. Ishan symbolizes it. He is neither a sanyasi (a hermit) nor a sansari. (a house holder-with worldly affairs). Ishan is like a Yayawar bird. Yayawar is a wandering bird. It stays in a particular area for a particular season only. When the season is over, it flies to its native land. Ishan can appropriately be compared to that Yayawar bird. Ishan has great understanding; he cares for his brothers. He can perceive the lives of his well-settled brothers. He is ready to leave his house if he has difficulties. Ishan is a carefree person. He has faith in God. He does not want to become a problem for his brother:

'Ashutoshbahi!'

'Shun chhe?'

*'manase jindagino ek pan divas- are ek pan kalak vyagratama na kadhvo joie.
E pachho nathi aavto. Tamne anukool na ahoy to bolido. Hun kalej jato
rahish.'* (Agantuk 23)

(*'Ahutoshbhai!'*

'What do you mean?'

'Man should not pass a single day in worry....not even an hour. It never comes back. If it is inconvenient to you, please tell. I will leave tomorrow.')

Living Two Worlds

Ishan lives in two worlds. He is constantly reminded of the life of ashram. The author has presented two worlds here; one is of the so called practical people and the other of the pious

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saints like Isahn, Omkargiri and Somgiri. Ishan was the most favourite disciple of his Guru Omkargiri. He constantly remembers all the preaching of his Guru. He used to say, '*Shastar padhte ho ki toteki tarah ratte rahte ho? Samjte nahin?- ye khakka putla hain- Is par anurag nahi rakhte.....bhitark dekho. Hammesha bhitark dekho bete! Bahar mat dekhna.*' (Agantuk 46) (Do you read the scriptures or simply recite them like a parrot? This body is nothing else but ash only. Do not have too much affection for it. Look inside. Do not see out side; always look inside, my son.) But Pratapgiri is jealous of Ishan. He tries to make a group of his own followers. Here Dhiruben exposes such so called Sanyasis who are do evil in the name of Dharma.

Ishan has some miraculous power in him. This pious and spirited Ishan attracts Fransis, the servant of Arnav. Fransis visualises Father Harris in Ishan. He becomes a devotee of Ishan and loves him. Ishan is so honest and innocent that he does not like people bowing down to him or calling him Baba, '*Have hun matra Ishan chhun ne Arnavbhai? Baba kahevdavvano ke mane koina pranam svikarvano koi adhikar nathi.*' (Agantuk 82) (Arnavbhai, I am Ishan now. I have no right to be addressed as Saint or accept the salute of the people.)

'Niranjanbhai bolya, Swamiji!'

'Na na na! Men Ashram chhodi didho chhe. Bhagva pan uteri didha chhe Have mane evu na kahevay.' (Agantuk 87)

(Niranjanbhai said, ' Swamiji!')

Oh no! I have left the Ashram and I also have given up renunciation. Now do not address me in such a way.)

When Rajat is improved by the healing touch and prayers of Ishan Niranjanbhai considers him a miraculous saint:

'Baba ! maro dikaro bachi gayo'.

'Ishwarni ichchha.'

'Ishawarni nahin Baba tamari'

‘ Na, mari nahin – Rajatni potani, ane Ishwarni ichchha vina to aapnathi shvas pan kya levay chhe? E to sauthi pahelo chhe. (Agantuk 104)

‘Baba, my son has been saved.’

‘It is the wish of God’

‘Baba! It is your wish not of God’

‘No, not mine; it is Rajat’s own wish. We can’t even breathe without the wish of the Almighty. He is the only saviour.’)

Conscious of His Goal

Ishan is a real Sanyasi. He is every moment conscious of worldly temptations. Ipsita is the very beautiful young daughter of Niranjambhai. She comes into his room off and on for various things. Ishan politely requests this beautiful devotee not to disturb him. Ishan has great faith in God. When Pratapgiri accuses Ishan of theft, he is not disturbed at all. He pacifies Fransis and asks him not to worry about false accusations. He says, *‘Aakhre to asatya aaropothi vichlit thava jevun hotun nathi. Kyarek ne kyank to satyano uday thay j chhe. E kshan ni rah jovani. (Agantuk 103)* (We should not be distressed by false accusations. Finally, there will be the rise of truth somewhere. Just wait for that moment.)

Ishan is completely conscious of his aim of life. That is Moksha- salvation. He comes back into worldly life, but he is constantly thinking about the ultimate aim of his life:

Sansarma aavya pachhi aava badha pratibandho chalshe nahin. Jatjatna sanjogo aavshe, jat jatna manaso malshe. E badhani vachche rahine pan aatmachintanma magna rahevanu chhe. Pote shun e kari shakshe? Kyarek lapsi javay to? (Agantuk 87)

(Such practices will not be possible in this practical world. Various types of circumstances will be created and there will be meetings with various types of people. Among all these, I have to contemplate on self. Will I be able to do it? What will happen if I am tempted somehow?)

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Ashutosh

Ashutosh is the elder brother of Ishan. He has a son and a daughter. He has love for his brother but he is under the control of his wife. He plans to rent a small flat for Ishan. He wants to settle him there. But due to his quarrelsome wife he has to send Ishan to Arnav's home. He also proves selfish in the end. Reema is a typical selfish wife. She is not ready to keep Ishan in her house. But when Ishan becomes a miraculous saint this selfish woman is ready to accept him.

Arnav

Arnav also is an elder brother of Ishan. He is the most materialistic and cunning man. He is the so-called practical man. Shalmali, Arnav's wife is a very big hypocrite and she is very selfish. She is very fond of show and pomp. She is mainly interested in materialistic things.

Ispita

Ipsita is the only good lady character in the novel. She is the daughter of Niranjambhai, a richman. She is young and beautiful and has the good qualities of brain and beauty. Though she is very rich she is a simple woman. She has a lot of devotion and respect for Ishan. She belongs to the good characters of the novel. Somgiri is one of the good characters. He is eager to take Ishan to the Ashram. He is a pious sanyasi. Niranjambhai is a typical rich father of a sick son. He has respect and love for Ishan. Fransis is a minor, but very impressive character. He has deep respect for Ishan.

Vision of the Author

Human life is the greatest gift of God. Happiness in life is the sole aim of all human beings. Dhiruben seems to convey a wonderful message here. She has written this dialogue for Ishan, '*manase jindagino ek pan divas- are ek pan kalak vyagratama na kadhvo joie. E pachho nathi aavto.*' (Agantuk 23) (Man should not pass a single day in worry....not even an hour. It never comes back.)

When Pratapgiri makes accusations of theft against him, Ishan is not disturbed at all. His response is very positive and optimistic. The pious, hermit says, '*Aakhre to asatya aaropothi*

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vichlit thava jevun hotun nathi. Kyarek ne kyank to satyano uday thay j chhe. E kshanni rah jovani. (Agantuk 103) (We should not wait for that moment.)

Language Style of the Author

Third person narrative technique is used here by Dhiruben. The author is omnipresent. The narration is very dramatic; we can almost visualize the events before our eyes. Ishan broods over his past life at the Ashram of Uttarkashi off and on. The preaching of Omkargiri is reflected through the mind of Ishan. Ishan's character is exposed through his thoughts and sentiments. Flashback technique is used to present the past life of Ishan.

Use of Mythology

Dhiruben has cited some allusions from Mythology. To present the situation of Ishan she has mentioned the character of Trishanku. Some other examples are of Abhimanyu and Vishwamitra. She compares the temptation of the world with the death of Abhimanyu in *Mahabhart*, “*Kyo Viswamitra aavine aa Trishanku mate srushtini rachna karshe?*” (Agantuk 27) (Who will become a Vishwamitra to create a world for this Trishanku?) Viswamitra is a mythological character from the *Ramayana*. He was a great saint. The Character of Trishanku is chosen to illustrate the exact situation of Ishan. It is a good comparison to Ishan's situation. As each chapter ends, there arises a sense of curiosity in the mind of the reader. The reader thinks of what will happen now? Really *Agantuk* is one of the finest novels ever written in the Gujarati language. The *Sahitya Akademy* award was awarded to this novel, and that was a fitting appreciation of Dhiruben's art.

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English Translation of Gujarati quotes from the novel was done by the author of this paper.

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