

The Dichotomy between Body and Mind in *The Woman of Basrur*

Basavaraj Naikar

Professor & Chairman, Department of English, Karnatak University, Dharwad, (Karnataka) India

Abstract

K. Shivarama Karanth (1902-97) is an outstanding novelist of Karnataka with some excellent novels to his credit. His *Yakshagana Bayalata* won the Karnataka State Sahitya Academy Award in 1957. His *Kala Prapancha*, a book about the world of art is very well known. A social activist, he has deeply involved in the life of the coastal area thereby enriching his knowledge of human nature and recording the same in his literary works. A man of remarkable independence of thought, with a wide range of interests, he spurned the insipid academic education, but trained himself in the university of life. The only figure instantly comparable to Shivarama Karanth is Rabindranath Tagore in terms of width of vision and multidisciplinary knowledge about life. But one striking difference between the two should be noted, i.e., whereas Tagore was a believer in god and supra-rationalism, Karanth happened to be an atheist and a rigorous rationalist.

Key Words: Body, mind, *The Woman of Basrur*

K. Shivarama Karanth (1902-97) happens to be one of the most outstanding novelists of Karnataka who has written more than forty novels in Kannada from *Marali Mannige* (*Back to Soil*) through *Alida Mele* (*After Death*) to *Mukajjiya Kanasugalu* (*The Dreams of Mukajji*). A multifaceted personality as he has, his contribution is not confined to fiction alone, but extends to other forms of writing as well. For example, he has written as many as sixty plays, *Vijnana Prapancha*, an encyclopaedia of science, *Bala Prapancha*, another for children, a dictionary, an autobiography and several books on art, theatre and architecture. He was responsible for the revival of *Yakshagana* tradition in the coastal part of Karnataka and brought international recognition for it. His *Yakshagana Bayalata* won the Karnataka State Sahitya Academy Award in 1957. His *Kala Prapancha*, a book about the world of

art is very well known. A social activist, he has deeply involved in the life of the coastal area thereby enriching his knowledge of human nature and recording the same in his literary works. A man of remarkable independence of thought, with a wide range of interests, he spurned the insipid academic education, but trained himself in the university of life. The only figure instantly comparable to Shivarama Karanth happens to be Rabindranath Tagore in terms of width of vision and multidisciplinary knowledge about life. But one striking difference between the two should be noted, i.e., whereas Tagore was a believer in god and supra-rationalism, Karanth happened to be an atheist and a rigorous rationalist. Whereas Tagore wrote in a lyrical vein, Karanth wrote in a reflective mode.

The Woman of Basrur (1997) happens to be only the sixth novel by Karanth to be made available in English translation. It has been

elegantly translated into English by H.Y. Sharada Prasad from the Kannada original called *Mai Managala Suliyalli* (1970). But the title of the English translation is a little disappointing on account of its baldness. One wishes he had retained the original title, which indicates the problematic of the dilemma between body and mind faced by the female protagonist of the novel.

Although the original Kannada novel was published in 1970, the problematic presented in it happens to be very relevant even today in the days of strong feminism and offers the picture of a woman with a will. The leitmotif in the novel happens to be the dichotomy between body and mind experienced by the protagonist Manjula, who belongs to the caste of courtesans in the coastal part of southern Karnataka. Her experiences are recorded in her handwritten autobiography with as much honesty as candour and accidentally discovered and read by her sister's granddaughter Chandri, who is impressed by it so much that she gets tears in her eyes out of admiration for the *elan-vital* of her grand aunt. The autobiography is inset by the fictional narration in a very natural way.

The life of Manjula as recorded by her in her autobiography happens to be a very interesting one, combining the individual and the social; the physical and the mental; and the survivalist and the artistic aspects of life. But the dichotomy between body and mind happens to be foregrounded in it, while the other aspects are treated in the background.

The individual problem of Manjula is particularly intensified by her social position. She is not a housewife belonging to a higher caste and enjoying the dignity and

security of matrimonial life. On the contrary, she belongs to the caste of courtesans, who are expected to earn their livelihood by selling their bodies and entertaining the customers with music and dance. Manjula, thus, has no choice but accept the calling of her profession. The forces of biological determinism restrict the parameters and define the direction of her life. Thus being compelled by the inevitable fate, Manjula has to ply her profession dutifully, if not voluntarily. She has all the ideal qualifications required for a courtesan. She, for example, has the physical beauty primarily required for her profession. Additionally, she is well trained in classical dance by her mother and in Hindustani music by Radhakrishna Buwa. The combination of all these qualities gives a special demand for her in the society.

As per the professional requirement, Manjula could not lead a matrimonial life, but earn her livelihood by selling her body to the customers, especially rich patrons and by exhibiting her musical and dance talent in the presence of discerning audience. Her name itself indicates the melodious element of her voice. Her physical beauty is, no doubt, an asset to her, which helps her to attract patrons in need of physical satisfaction. But far from being an ordinary lady, Manjula happens to be a very sensitive lady with an alert mind. Just as her patrons seek satisfaction in her company, she also seeks satisfaction in their company because of the natural hungers of her body. But she suffers from a sense of frustration when the pleasures of the body are not accompanied by those of the mind and *vice versa*. Thus Manjula feels a non-alignment between the physical fulfillment and the psychic one. As the original title of the novel indicates, she is

caught now in the whirlpool of body, now in the whirlpool of mind. The experience of the dichotomy between body and mind becomes very intense. That is why she remembers what her mother used to say and tries to understand its significance. Her mother used to say, "We are here to sell our bodies, never our minds" (p. 33). But Manjula cannot accept the dictum of her mother perhaps because of the gap of philosophies between the two. Manjula is, obviously, endowed with a more sensitive mind than her mother and therefore feels a greater need to synchronize the interests of the body and those of the mind in order to live a whole life. She rightly introspects about herself:

When reviewing my life, my relationships and the hurricanes that I have been caught up in, I can say that there have been moments when I felt I had no mind of my own and that my corporeal body was inert and devoid of any sensation whatever. Can we, by the exercise of our will, bring about a union of these entities? Do we have that capacity? During some phases my body has called the tune, in others the mind. It is only when both ruled me jointly that I have felt I existed. In such moments I fail to make out which of the two deserves being called the 'I'. What *is*, this I-ness? (p. 33)

The philosophical problem of synthesizing the powers and pleasure of the body and those of the mind and the obstacles in the achievement of such a synthesis have been experienced by Manjula not in *a priori* way but in an *a posteriori* way. She becomes aware of the essence of life only through the existence and by oscillating between the pleasures of the body and those of the mind

and finally resolving the dichotomy between the two.

Manjula is trapped by the existential circumstances of her life. Being the daughter of a courtesan, Bhavani and her patron Pala and having belonged to the caste of professional prostitutes, she has no choice at all except to conform to the calling of her caste in the southern part of coastal Karnataka. She is fated to make the best out of her situation. As a child she wonders at the fact as to why her father Pala was not married to her mother but remained only a patron. It is only gradually that she realizes the peculiarities of her caste and grows reconciled to her lot.

After the death of her father and mother consecutively, Manjula is compelled to ply her profession. Her knowledge of dance and music come in handy for her profession. She entertains only a select number of patrons for her security, though she can receive a few occasional customers too. She has accepted the inevitability of selling her body to the seekers of pleasure, but sometimes she feels disgusted with the sexual act itself. With the five important men with whom she comes in contact in her life consecutively, she has a variety of uneven and contradictory experiences, which make her conscious of the dilemma between the corporeal pleasure and psychic pleasure.

The first lover, who gravitates towards her at the beginning of her profession, happens to be Kandalur Vasudeva Pai. A distant relative of Manjula (he happens to be the son of Pala's sister.) takes interest in her and tries to win her favours by sending gifts of cashews, mangoes, Gulvadi rice, *saris*, fruits, armlets, etc. Although she is initially indifferent to him, finally she admits him

into her favour. Encouraged by her green signal, K.V. Pai goes to her house and listens to her music. On account of her bubbling youth, Manjula also pines for him. After the musical recital, she leads him upstairs into the bedroom to have a sense of physical fulfillment. She unites with him with a great expectation, but alas, she is deeply disappointed with him because of his nonrealistic roughness and indifference to the finer aspects of love. Manjula finds only a void in him. She realizes that he has only a body and no mind. She also feels hurt to observe that he, in spite of his exclusive interest in physical pleasure in her company, has the puritanical consciousness of Brahmanical caste-superiority, which prevents him from tasting the milk offered by her. As days go by, she understands his low taste and mindlessness very clearly. On one Yugadi festival day, he sends her some gifts including the oleographs of Ravi Varma depicting the beauty of semi-naked females. Manjula dreads the - animal behaviour of K.V. Pai in bed and his exclusive interest in her body as symbolically conveyed to her in her dream. She is also shocked to learn that she is not the only mistress that Pai has, but that he has many other mistresses elsewhere including Kapila, whom he has cheated of her jewellery. Thus, early in her profession Manjula develops a dread and disgust for the aggressive sex demanded by mindless males. Being an oversensitive lady, she longs for tenderness of emotion and aesthetic approach, which can beautify the moments of mating.

Deeply disappointed by the first patron, K.V. Pai, Manjula tries to seek the ideal combination of physical satisfaction and mental one in some other man. Kokkarane

Sheena happens to be such a man from whom she expects to have the desirable fulfillment. When Sheena comes to see her after a long interval of time, she welcomes him and offers him food and shelter. She even surrenders herself to him sexually with a great expectation. But contrary to her expectation, he fails to satisfy her physically on account of his ineffectiveness in the performance. Consequently, she feels deeply disappointed with him even on the physical level, let alone on the mental one. Now she has a contrastive picture of two men who possessed her. She rightly compares K.V. Pai to an eagle and Sheena to a sparrow. Pai's aggressiveness provides a sharp contrast to Sheena's feebleness.

Manjula's desire for motherhood goes hand in hand with that for physical fulfillment. She wants to have children who can provide a direction to her life. But her hope for progeny is not realized for a long time. Once Venkatu of Dharwad, a relation and student of Radhakrishna Buwa, is brought by Padmanabha to see Manjula. She treats him nicely because he also happens to be a student of her own music teacher. She sings at his request and listens to his singing also. She admires his dedication to music. He has come to Basrur to search for a bride for himself. Venkatu spends five nights with Manjula but she feels disappointed with him also as she seems to have lost her sensitivity. In spite of her admiration for his artistic talent, she cannot appreciate his inability to satisfy her physically. She pines for what is not. In this phase of her experience the gap between artistic satisfaction and sexual one remains blatant and aggravates her frustration in life.

In the next phase of her professional life, she

happens to meet Ulloor Subraya of Ampar. Earlier, he had sent a letter to her warning about the unreliability of K.V. Pai's nature intensified further by his financial losses. He had written the precautionary letter to her not out of jealousy but out of righteous concern for an innocent courtesan like Manjula. When Manjula has been waiting for a man to fill in the lacuna of her life, she remembers the man, who is said to be a connoisseur of *Yakshagana* performances. She, therefore, writes an apologetic letter to Ulloor Subraya and invites him to her house for listening to her music. Accordingly, he visits her house, listens to her excellent music with appreciation and gifts a ring to her. A few more visits by Ulloor Subraya to her house give her a clearer picture of his artistic personality, sensitive mind and sympathetic heart. Very soon Manjula begins to see a striking contrast between him and her earlier lover K. V. Pai. Ulloor Subraya disapproves of the paintings of Ravi Varma depicting the beauty of semi-naked females of mythical stories and comments upon the low taste of the man, who has presented them to Manjula. Manjula does not reveal the identity of the donor of those pictures, but inwardly dislikes K.V. Pai who had given them to her. With the repetitions of Ulloor's visits to her house, the affinity between the two grows deeper. Consequently, he is deemed by her to be her patron, who sends regular gifts to her and invites her to Navaratri festival for singing. Ulloor Subraya is a man of very fine manners and artistic bent of mind and sympathetic heart. He knows how to talk to her tenderly and pleasantly and caress her body deftly and revere her musical talent. Thus inspired by his sensitive and sophisticated behaviour with her, Manjula

dreams of having real fulfillment with him in bed also. She, therefore, invites him into bed and has a number of unions with him. But alas! She is again disappointed in her experience with him. She realizes that he can stimulate her very deftly and artistically but miserably fails at the moment of climax. She feels that he can only arouse her without proportionally quenching her powerful desire. Although Ulloor Subraya has the excellent qualities of mind and heart, he lacks the qualities of a virile body. Manjula suffers from a frustration caused by the wide chasm between mind and body in him. In spite of the deep-seated frustration, she continues to love him because of the financial and emotional security offered by him. He never lets her down. Before his death by paralysis, he legally bestows some land upon her for her livelihood. In spite of Manjula's sexual frustration in her relationship with Ulloor Subraya, she derives some mental stability from him, who gives her the strength of the soul to accept the contingencies of life. She learns from him the affirmative attitude to life, which enables her not to be ashamed of sex or of her profession and to sublimate her emotions through the pursuit of music. She, therefore, concentrates her attention on music and adapts an attitude of *bhakti* towards Lord Krishna by becoming a metaphorical Radha.

Meanwhile, the quirks of fate bring her in contact with other men. When, for example, she accepts the invitation from landlord Nanjappa of Kalurkatte to give a musical recital at his eldest son's marriage, she is actually in search of a new patron, who can give her a sense of emotional stability. Her musical talent is appreciated by the rural audience and she is amply rewarded in terms of cash and gold. Meanwhile, she surrenders

herself to landlord Nanjappa, who gives her the maximum physical fulfillment that she has longed for all through her life. A virile man who not only kindles her emotion, but also satisfies all the deeper demands of her body. She is satisfied by him so much that she hopes to have a child by him. After that incident she unites with Subbarao of Mekkemane also. After a month or so, she is happy to learn that she is pregnant and that her dream of motherhood is going to be realized soon. But alas! Fate is very cruel to her. She is shocked to know retrospectively about Nanjappa's rowdiness, murderous and fraudulent behaviour. She is further frustrated to be delivered of a stillborn child resembling the demoniac features of Nanjappa. Again her sexual fulfillment in her encounter with Nanjappa is not matched by intellectual, artistic and cordial qualities so conspicuously absent in him. She experiences another kind of dichotomy between the pleasures of the body and those of the mind and heart.

The last important man brought into her life by fate gives her another kind of experience. He comes to her house as a stranger and introduces himself as Laxmana Rao and enjoys sex with her. Manjula experiences the trance of union with him and has a real fulfillment in her life. But she is a little disconcerted when he reveals his real identity as the Swamiji of Sooramballi Monastery. The Swamiji, namely, Ananda Tirtha frankly confesses how he had been ordained as a holy man in his eighth year of age itself, how he did not know about

religion any more than any common man knew and how he had longed for the release or *moksha* in the manner in which Lord Krishna had achieved it in the company of *gopikas*. By now Manjula has acquired some maturity and understands the emotional basis of life concealed behind the cultural and religious superstructure. She overcomes her sense of discomfiture and consequently deems herself to be lucky to be the instrument of giving a sense of release to the Swamiji, no matter how much his reputation may be damaged in the society. He visits her regularly for about four months. The lesson that she has learnt from Ulloor Subraya helps her to enjoy and make the best of the transient beauty of life like that of a *parijata* or a lotus. Thus she is able to overcome the partial frustrations of her life by accepting the vicissitudes of life and deriving a sense of fulfillment.

When Chandri completes reading her great aunt Manjula's autobiography she cannot help admiring the woman with a will and sheds tears of sympathy for her adventurous encounters with fate.

The Woman of Basrur, which has been elegantly translated into English by H.Y. Sharada Prasad, is remarkable for its depiction of the life of a sensitive courtesan and therefore invites comparison with similar novels in Indian as well as Indian English literatures for the enrichment of the pan-Indian critical sensibility through the removal of the barriers of languages. It is truly a Lawrentian novel in the Indian context.

Reference:

Karant. Shivarama, *The Woman of Basrur*, trans. from the Kannada by H.Y. Sharada Prasad, Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1997. (All the page references are to this edition.)