

Balancing Samskara Dynamic and Socialist Dialectic – Glimpses of Professor Anantha Murty

Prof. M. Sivaramkrishna

The spontaneous response to Professor Anantha Murty's passing away is immense grief. But, in his case the natural need not be rational. Grief is not the residue. His invaluable contribution, versatile, varied and original, mocks, defies death itself. "Death, be not proud!" comes to mind. He suffered enormously from health problems. But, for all I know, he may have followed the wise way: "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional." And "the sorrow that sorrow is," is the root of all imperishable creativity. In whatever form and field it manifests. The mark of a first-rate intelligence, they say, is the ability to hold two apparently opposed ideas and experiences, and yet retain the ability to keep their bifurcation at a distance. Hence the enduring core of this remarkable personage – it seems to me.

One looks at the paradox: educated in English – "the other tongue" – he enriched and expanded the creative potential of his "mother" tongue. He refused to be a victim of having – to use R. Parthasarathy's theme of his classic poem – his "tongue in English chains." Perhaps, he never had the delusion which many have that English is "the lie of the land", an agenda of colonial hegemony. Can we say, that socialism and his inescapable samskaras jostled for space which he allotted without any undue strife. More simplistically, can we characterize it as "tranquility in turmoil"? The tranquility of tradition and the turmoil of contemporaneity blended in him without any privileging. The post, post-modernists may wince: but Professor Anantha Murty's concerns, in one way or the other, hovered over the four values identified by tradition: ethics, economics, enjoyment and emancipation.

Let me now recall my experiences not many, but quite significant to me. I saw him, for the first time, in a seminar held by the Osmania University – Department of English. [Professor Isaac Sequiera, my colleague, used to say: Hyderabad is famous for minars and seminars!]. The theme was, broadly, "The Social aspects of literary texts" – an area which had special interest for us, notably for Professor Satyanarain Singh. When we learnt that AM (from now on) was one of the participants, our expectations ran high. His classic SAMSKARA was very much in the critical air! I, for one, had premonitions about the text which were not wholly positive. I think I sensed disquiet about the 'climactic' "scenario"!

As expected, he was urbane, “polished” and conviction about what he was saying [and sometimes showing through his metaphors] rang high. If I recall correctly, those were the days of “Emergency”. But AM’s was scintillating, specially his critique of restriction on the freedom of expression. As far as I remember. But even now I have no doubt: one “affirmation” he made puzzled, indeed startled me. The gist of it was – to put it in a sanitized way – “without social awareness as an integral element, no text can be called a literary text.” He most probably put this idea/axiom in a more sophisticated manner.

I thought I heard wrong. But I became alert. It was an ideological assumption. Why should I object to his views? This “passionless good sense” I couldn’t command at that time. My conviction, even now, is social critiques and their solutions, however real and relevant, are only raw-materials for art. First, we (I) have to check whether they come into being as an aesthetic text – a perennial contribution. Overcoming my innate self-consciousness about debate, I placed this issue before AM. The audience’s reaction to my question, I think, was not, I suppose, positive. But, then, AM though showed a little surprise, responded in a sensible, sensitive way: texts need not have exclusively “social” or other orientations. But, then, we do require to be holistic: other cultural aspects and faiths and beliefs do constitute the overall text. And yet the focus can be the choice left to the writer. There could be a visible or underlying centre for the text. The only ‘condition’ is not to “marginalize” anything: (The winds of ‘decentering’ and ‘deconstructing’ were not very cyclonic at that time, I assume).

But let me recall what struck me most: AM’s grace and openness to listen and surely perception of the validity of any perspective (without, of course, its acceptance, in toto). This was more significant to me: for, later, there were one or two colleagues who felt I was ‘rude’ in raising the issue with such a stalwart as AM. I laughed and said: “otherwise, they won’t notice me: I am short, only 5’2” with hair!” That was that. The next time I saw AM was not a seminar context. It was a selection committee meeting for our promotion as Professors – in Osmania University. Lest you make the mistake - not in University of Hyderabad. (That I was advised not to attend the interview in University of Hyderabad by a very famous Indo- English poet of those days is a story which this is not the context to tell). When my turn came and I entered the room with an unmanageable lot of books to impress the examiners, I had a surprise in store. AM was one of the subject experts. (Another was Professor Seturam with whom, earlier, I shared an intense interest in Sri Aurobindo). I could see that both recognized me and their body language was evidently friendly: “don’t be tense”!

The interview was about to end. The Vice Chancellor was on the point of closing the 'session'. But AM suddenly intervened: "Just a minute, Dr. Sivaramkrishna! Can I ask one final question?" My imminent relief from the turmoil of the interview was scotched. AM asked: "Can you tell me how you respond to Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable?" Without batting an eyelid – literally – I answered: "It was a *novel*, then, it is a *classic* now". I thought I gave a brilliant answer. But AM continued: "Can you elaborate?" Instinctively, I recalled my 'social awareness vs. literature' conundrum. And also some insights of my post- doctoral research work on "facets of Consciousness and Creativity". I framed an answer roughly in this way: "Untouchable has achieved transcendence of the apparently peripheral Indian problem but the essentially perennial predicament of humans, facing various forms of oppression globally." This is the gist.

I still recall. The word "transcendence" lit up AM's eyes. "Yes, yes. It's transcendence. That's the magic of the classic." That was my most memorable moment. We had no interview, only precious moments of inner views which coincided. I met him again in "Dhanvaloka", the centre in Mysore which Professor C.D. Narasimhaiah founded. It was again a VIDWAT GOSHTI on T.S.Eliot (my more than literary guru). It was brief and there was nothing worth recalling. Except the founder's remark: "Your presentation is interesting but your post-modern concerns are..." "Irritating?" I completed the remark.

It was again the context of a seminar in Delhi which focused on Viswanatha Satyanarayana the Jnanapeeth Awardee and a towering personality in modern Telugu literature. A classicist to the core, he was a balanced modernist. If I recall it was Professor Bhadriraja Krishnamurti the director of the seminar. The area I was given concerned Viswanatha's characters in his Ramayana Kalpavrikshamu.

After the inaugural I met AM who was the then President of the Sahitya Academy and conveyed my regards, thanking him for the opportunity to participate in such an invaluable GOSHTI. "I would certainly like to listen to your presentation – though I have to leave immediately after your paper" he said. It was a privilege. I presented my paper focusing on Kaikeyi, substantially from some verses which I translated into English. It was a tough job and I don't think they measure up to anything acceptable. But I enjoyed wrestling with the great classic.

I again met AM in Delhi. It was also a seminar and I was the convener. AM was then the President of the National Book Trust. I went to the Trust office and met him. He was serene, relaxed and in a mood to spend some time. I cannot recall all that he spoke: but one thing he mentioned was: "Telugu literature does not seem to figure in translation into English much! That's something which needs to be looked into!" I agreed but by passing any comment, I make a general remark "we seem to lack inwardness in English and many translations from Telugu seem to be hastily done!" I was reluctant to fully admit the truth of AM's observation. "Why don't you try your hand at translation?" he asked. I laughed away the question.

Perhaps, it was this conversation which resulted in AM making me a member of the NBT. But, alas, in spite of stalwarts like Professor Bhadriraja Krishnamurti, the NBT board for Telugu met, during my tenure, rarely in the Telugu University. Professor Krishnamurti chaired the session and many of the books which we were supposed to examine for or against recommendation never sent to us. I, of course, made my choice of books clear. Professor Krishnamurti was sympathetic to my list. But in the finals, it was a hasty retreat. AM gave me an opportunity, but alas, 'constraints' of omission and commission crippled what little we could do.

AM's last link with me took place in the form of reviewing his small book entitled Tradition and Modernity. This was sent to me by the editor of Bulletin of the CIEFL (now EFLU). {It perhaps happened most probably because I was a member of the Academic Senate of CIEFL, a position which the UGC chairman at that time, recommended.} The tradition-modernity pamphlet reflected the core of AM's ideology, though, surprisingly, the whole argument hardly emerged clearly. (It was, I recall, a lecture he gave). At this time, he was Vice-Chancellor of Gandhi University in Kerala.

To sum up my impressions: most of us are both beneficiaries and victims of ideological bifurcations (admitting the political one as the most powerful). One hesitates to call it "split personality". One of the most brilliant writers with socialism as the core, subject to an intolerable physical ailment and yet retaining the sharp awareness of a global nature? Can we then call it bifurcation/ the body has its own logic which does not, generally, tamper with or terminate the intellect. And Professor AM's intellect could explore the realities today, by and large, free from, divisive disruption. We should also explore the factors which went into the novel specially the paradigm of Samskara as the key to understanding his overall writing. "Samskaras" innate, unchangeable or losing their identity become material for creative exploration? The dialectic is as fascinating as annoying.

More intensive study of what he left for us – without self-styled frames of reference – is the greatest manner of paying our debt to him. The so-called globalization and its manifest forms give us insights which are extremely valuable but not always valid. Once we think of them as only a political / social phenomenon, we move away from AM. That is not his SAMSKARA in every sense of the word.

This 'paper', owes, in every way, to the persistence with which my invaluable mentor in many areas – Ravela Somayya – urged that I should do this strictly random effort. My gratitude to him is immense. Thanks to him, I could talk to AM a year or two ago, also.

Department of English (Retd)
Osmania University, Hyderabad
Telangana State

