



A Philosophical and Socio-Cultural Examination of S.L. Bhyrappa's *Vamshavriksha*

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to conduct an analysis of S.L. Bhyrappa's *Vamshavriksha* (1965), a seminal novel that explores the tensions between traditional Indian ethical frameworks (Dharma) and the burgeoning forces of individualism and modernity. The paper investigates how Bhyrappa utilizes the central metaphor of the 'family tree' to investigate several aspects like the validity of lineage, the rigidity of social taboos, and the existential search for personal authenticity. Bhyrappa has done this within the socio-historical landscape of the 1930s in Karnataka.

Another aim of this paper is to delineate the contrasting philosophical trajectories of the protagonists such as Srinivasa Shrothri, an embodiment of Vedic ideals of renunciation and moral restraint, and Katyayani, a representative with instinctive urge for emotional and physical fulfillment. Further, the study attempts to demonstrate *Vamshavriksha* as a novel that serves a critical meditation on the failure of traditional institutions in the face of modern subjectivity. Finally, the paper tries to highlight the novel's enduring relevance as a nuanced inquiry into the human condition where fate, duty, and desire collide in the search for truth.

Keywords: SL Bhyrappa, *Vamshavriksha*, tradition versus modernity, social taboos, inquiry into the human condition

Santeshivara Lingannaiah Bhyrappa is a Kannada novelist whose works are immensely popular both in India and abroad. He stands as a testament to the universal appeal of deeply rooted Indian narratives. His major works have been the centre of several public debates, often sparking intense controversy due to their 'unsparing critique' of established social norms and ideological positions. They are unique in terms of theme, structure, and characterization. They often employ a 'polyphony of voices' where different characters present their distinct philosophies and justifications for their actions. He manages to showcase the 'paradox and irony of human condition' allowing the reader to make judgement explicitly. In the words of Dr. Thoranagatti,

His work focuses on fundamental human predicaments, social structures and prevailing norms. In addition to an in-depth knowledge of Indian philosophical and cultural traditions, Bhyrappa has had intense personal experiences in both rural and urban settings.

His characters span the centuries, from *Parva*, which is set around 1200 BC to *Tanthu*, which is set in post-independence India. He probes into human nature and analyses love, duty and fate within a matrix of different value systems. This ensures that his characters are not merely 'mechanical mouthpieces' but are deeply realized individuals who struggles with the weights of history, culture, and their own instincts.

Bhyrappa's *Vamshavriksha* is often considered the best novels which he has written. It serves as a landmark both in his career and in the history of Kannada literature. It remained 'contemporary' for over fifty years and considered one of the most widely read novels since its publication in 1960. Its enduring legacy is reflected in its adaptation into award-winning films and stays, as well as its inclusion in university curricula across the country.

Spanning three generations and varied nuances of thoughts and feeling, *Vamshavriksha* portrays the moral dilemmas that erupt in a small tradition bound town, Nanjangud, in Karnataka when long established social patterns are questions in the name of individual fulfilment. This setting is a microcosm of a society where every action is expected to enhance the name of the 'vamsha'. The conflict arises when the modern world – embodied by Western education and the pursuit of individual happiness – begins to penetrate this closed system.

Srinivasa Shrothri, a learned man in Sanskrit and a revered man of the village, lives along with his wife, Bhagirathamma, son Nanjunda, and servant-maid Lakshmi. He is not just an 'orthodox' figure but a scholar in Indian philosophy and the shastras. As a result, priests and professors frequently consult for spiritual problems.

Shrothri is an infallible follower of Dharma and has tremendous faith in and respect for his lineage. He views himself as a part of a great tree, the tree of his ancestors, but not as an individual in the Western sense. His sense of duty is so deep that he views his life as a series of obligations to the past and the future, leaving little room for personal ambition or physical desire.

After several years, Shrothri's son Nanjunda is married to Katyayani, the central figure of the novel. Later when their son, Cheeni was six month old Nanjunda dies as he is drowned by a whirlpool while bathing in the river, leaving young Katyayani bleak future. This 'cruel hand of fate' is a recurring theme in Bhyrappa's work, where a single, unpredictable event shatters the established social pattern and forces the characters into a moral dilemma. The death of Nanjunda is a misfortune but it subjects Katyayani to the harsh restrictions and ritual austerity imposed on Hindu widows in the 1920s and 1930s. The bleak future she faces is one of social ostracism, loneliness, and the expectation that she will give up all pleasures of life to maintain the family honour.

Shrothri bears this unfortunate incident with great self-control and equanimity of mind. The death of his one is not a despondency but a steadfast belief, that teaches grief should be subdued and sublimated through the understanding of the cosmic order. Inspired by his unparalleled belief in 'Dharma' and religion, he suggests Katyayani read Hindu scripts to divert her mind. He attempts to help her by subdue her instincts and find mental peace by immersing herself in timeless wisdom of the *shastras*. But the scripts fail to appeal to her imagination because she represents a modern existential agency that cannot find satisfaction in petty rigidities of traditional advice.

Prof. Sadasiva Rao, one of Nanjunda's teachers and historian, is full of admiration and respect for Shrothri. He considers Shrothri as a 'litterateur par excellence' and a true 'scholar of Indian philosophy'. He visits Nanjangud to present his book on ancient political science in India to Shrothri and apprise him of his new project of writing a methodical account of the cultural history of India, for which he seeks his blessings and help. Shrothri readily agrees to render his services and also provides financial support. He gives Rs.1,000 as an initial grant and asks him to embark on a tour of India to visit libraries, monuments, and archives. This shows that Shrothri is not a blind follower of tradition but a man who values merit, talent, and erudition. He believes that Rao's work contributes to a correct perspective of history, even if it differs from the purely traditional view. This partnership between the Vedic scholar and the modern historian is one of many linked destinies that Bhyrappa explores in the novel.

Katyayani fed up with loneliness and widowhood yearns for a way out. She feels that her youth and beauty are being wasted and that it is immoral for a society to burn the beauty of a woman in the name of tradition. This yearning is her natural dharma asserting itself against the socially prescribed norms of womanhood. She persuades her in-laws and joins Mysore University where Prof. Sadasiva Rao introduces her to Raja, his brother who is working in the same university and Nagalakshmi, his wife. Shrothri advises her to pursue BA degree which her husband Nanjunda had been studying before his death. She understands this and enters university. Her entry opens her up to the outside world and embodies her through education. It even provides the new space that she needs to discover a new future.

Raja, a western educated young man, who is attracted to her beauty defies social taboo against widowhood and proposes to her. This proposal is an act of defiance that forces Katyayani to choose between her loyalty to the Shrothri lineage and her individual aspiration for physical and emotional fulfillment. At the insistence of Raja, Katyayani writes a letter seeking Shrothri's blessings and acceptance of their marriage. This letter is a mortal blow to the traditional expectations of the Shrothri household as it violates long-established social norms in the name of personal fulfillment.

Shrothri, while giving full freedom to act on her own volition (wish), reflects on how he chose the path of Dharma when his wife, declared incapable of producing children, offered Lakshmi. And he also elucidates how it is not 'dharma' to revert to the life of a householder when it is terminated. In the words of Shrothri,

True dharma, I believe, is not presenting external rules and customs that are imposed on the individual against his or her will.

This compassionate interpretation of the shastras suggests that Dharma must be understood from within and must be consistent with one's own idea of justice.

Katyayani, under the influence of pious and virtuous Shrothri, decides not to marry Raja Rao. She attempts to divert her mind reading scriptures but finds only suffocation. She feels the tremendous force of her love of Raja afterwards and makes up her mind and marries Raja. This decision is a direct challenge to the traditional expectations. It even represents the victory of personal fulfillment over social patterns. Later, she thinks of claiming her son, but leaves Cheeni with her in-laws, as she thinks it is immoral on her part to take away their only hope.

Prof. Sadasiva Rao runs into a Ceylonese student of history, Karuna on one of his historical towns to Ajanta. Karuna (also known as Ratne) is a historian of Buddhism from Cambridge who is enchanted by the woman's sharp mind and dedication to her research. She joins as a research scholar under him and plays a pivotal role in his project by bringing out volume after volume of his magnum opus. Seeing her dedication, Rao concludes that she is indispensable for the completion of his project and marries her for intellectual reasons than for physical desires. As she starts living in a separate house, Nagalakshmi, first wife, continues to live along with her son in Raja's house.

Katyayani and Raja, who are very fond of children, are dejected when she suffers her third abortion and showers all their parental love on Prithvi, Nagalakshmi's son. When Raja was transferred to Bangalore, he finds a teaching job for Katyayani also. After a brief stint in Bangalore, they are again transferred to Mysore, where they come to know that the Cheeni, now a young man, has lost his grandmother and is being brought up by his grandfather Shrothri. Katyayani feels an irresistible urge to see Cheeni. This yearning is her motherly instinct reasserting itself after years of immersion in experience with Raja. She believes that education and modernity might allow for a reconciliation, but she underestimates the rigid adherence to social consequences that Shrothri Jr. has internalized.

Coincidentally Cheeni joins the same college in which his mother is working but he refuses to acknowledge her love as it will hurt Shrothri, from whom he has great affection and respect. He recollects Shrothri's words as follows:

Contact with an object ... results in attachment to it. Once the attachment develops, it would be impossible to escape from its hold. Therefore, we must abjure such contact.

This repudiation by her own son gives a mortal blow to Katyayani, who loses all her faith in life.

Meanwhile Shrothri learns from Lakshmi about the illegitimacy of his birth. This ‘unearthing and unveiling falsehood’ is the landmark work of the novel because it busts the myth and mystery of noble birth. He discovers an old letter addressed to his father that cursed the man for cheating his brother out of the ancestral property. This discovery shatters his steadfast beliefs in the sanctity of the family tree and the purity of his lineage. The ‘Vamshavriksha’ he worshipped is revealed to be built on human weakness and deception. His greedy impotent and childless father Nanjunda (senior) to prevent his property being inherited by his brother Kittappa after his death persuades Shrothri’s mother to seduce a singer, Shyamadas. She gives birth to Srinivasa Shrothri.

Shrothri persuades Cheeni that according to dharma the property belongs to Kittappa and his heir. They frantically search for them but fail. Shrothri’s lingering desire to take up sanyasa strengthens with this knowledge. He distributes all his property for charitable and religious deeds. He marries Cheeni off to complete his householder duties before departing for Hardwar.

All townsmen gather to give a farewell to the revered old man Shrothri as he is on his way to Hardwar. He thinks of seeing Katyayani for the last time. So, he goes to Rao’s house where he comes to know about the death of Sadasiva Rao after the competition of his voluminous project.

At the house of Raja Rao, incidentally, both Shrothri and Cheeni arrive on time to see Katyayani suffer her death throws and perform the last rituals. This intensely dramatic scene is the novel’s climax where the clash of ideas and human emotions culminate in an epiphanic moment of discovery. Finally, Shrothri leaves the place and starts his journey all alone at the end of the novel, turning ‘from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from mortality to immortality.’

The novel is fraught with the symbol of a ‘tree’ as Katyayani gets a dried mango ‘tree’ axed and plants a new one to entwine a creeper to it and give a new lease of life. Later when her son refuses to respond to her love, she feels like a ‘tree’ refused by its own branch. And lastly Shrothri when he learns about his illegitimate birth feels like a branch severed from a tree. K. Venkatesh (see his *Bhyrappa: An Appraisal*) is of the opinion that,

Vamshavriksha is a sensitive exploration of love and loss, tragedy and triumph, interwoven with spiritual, historical and culture insights. It also deals with the difficult and contentious subject of the remarriage of a widow in the conservative society of the 1930s.

The novel can be viewed in four different ways such as clash of Western and Hindu philosophy, social pattern versus individual fulfilment, modernity versus traditionalism, and lineage versus characters.

In the words of K.M. George, (Comparative Indian Literature), “His (Bhyrappa’s) major characters have clearly articulated philosophies – at least, clear attitudes and aspirations – and seek to live by them.” Shrothri is a typical representative of Hindu philosophy and Katyaya along with Raja, Rao and Karuna represents western philosophy. Bhyrappa has elucidated pros and cons of both philosophies and left the judgement to the readers.

Bhyrappa might have wanted *Vamshavriksha* to convey that when social pattern becomes rigid and does not allow individuals just desires to be fulfilled, innocent people like Katyayani will always transcend the boundaries and suffer social sanctions. Individual happiness is to be given preference over untenable and blind social traditions and customs. Just because Katyayani defied the taboos against widow remarriage, she is looked down upon by the society and even she jeopardizes the relationship with her son. Karuna, as well, can also be viewed as western educated woman who goes against the society to attain her intellectual goals. According to K.M. George, “Bhyrappa’s characters take decisions, make choices and face the consequences.”

Katyayani, Raja, Ro and Karuna stand as beacons of modernity while Shrothri, formidable and over-inspiring stands for traditions and customs. Bhyrappa seems to conclude that modernity is not always synonymous to immorality and tradition to morality. Sometimes tradition can be used as a veil by hypocrites while bantering innocent people who go against them candidly. K.M. George opines that “the characters are embodiments of values and attitudes.” He further says that Bhyrappa uses them to explore the interplay of fate, tradition, desire, and intellect. Shrothri embodies the Vedic scholar who follows the tradition of grihastha-dharma, while Katyayani embodies the emotional natural law of *Prakruti*.

Bhyrappa seems to convey that it's not the lineage that makes a man great but his own deeds as the mystery of noble birth is busted and replaced by the true triumph of character and grit. He seems to support the saying ‘character is destiny,’ showing that meaning is found in the light of the truth discovered, even if that truth is bitter and wounding.

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