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MANJERI ISVARAN'S *IMMERSION*: A NOVEL PAR EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Manjerilsvaran's *Immersion* published in 1951. Isvaran had given it a subtitle 'A Story.' Critics have wrongly termed it as a 'long short story.' As the term appeared even to them as ludicrous, they have borrowed a term from French, 'nouvelle', to classify the type of work *Immersion* is. Probably all these misrepresentations have stemmed out from the hack literature found in the first volume of the book where it is written as follows:- "In the absence of a better word in English for what is in French is the nouvelle-*Immersion* can be called a long – short story". Like Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, *Immersion* is certainly a novel.

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Manjeri Sundraraman Isvaran (1910-1966) is one of the pioneers of Indian Writing in English. He started his career as a freelance journalist, became the editor of *Swatantra* and finally worked as the secretary of the National Book Trust, New Delhi. His creative endeavors cover every genre of literature- poetry (ten volumes), plays ("Yamma and Yami", "Song of the Gypsymaiden"), short stories (eight books), a large number of critical writings and translations, and a book of criticism. His magnum opus is the long short story "Immersion" which is perhaps the most authentic and artistic of all his fictional writings. It was made into a film in Telugu in 1979 by B.S Narayana under the title "Nimajjanam" which won the President's Award of that year.

The form of a novel is difficult to be defined because it has, in fact, no rigid framework, whereas a short story is like a photographic picture where moment freezes into permanence. Like a sonnet, it is a moment's monument. No series of movements, or continuity of action, is permitted in a short story. On the other hand, novel is an extended narrative and its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plots, an ampler development of milieu, and a more sustained and subtle exploration of character than a short story.

The story of *Immersion* is spread over a fortnight, from the night in which Akhileswaran and Jagadamba begin their journey to Banares and Akhileswaran's return to his native village after his wife's immersion in the Ganga. It is not the story of a moment. At least three incidents which are coherent only when put in a time sequence, make up the plot of the novel. In delineating the cause and effect of the happenings Isvaran puts together a great network of Hindu philosophy of Karma, role of Fate and indifference of gods to human beings.

It also weaves together a great pattern of Hindu tradition, rituals and superstitions like the necessity of a son's presence at his father's death bed, immersion of the ashes of the dead in Banares and death of a woman as 'sumangali.' Every incident depends on causality and a proper understanding of the plot demands intelligence and memory.

In a short story, both the range and scenes are limited. A short story cannot present life in all its vicissitudes. The obvious distinctive element which distinguishes it from every other art is its shortness, the marked traits of it being "brevity, density and unity." Brander Mathews says that a short story "deals with a single character, a single situation, a single emotion or a series of emotions called forth by a single emotion." (Rohrberger 12)

*Immersion* contains a series of incidents, it deals mainly with the theme of Akhileswaran's dutiful mission to Banares to immerse the ashes of his father in the sacred river of Ganga. It also contains the sad story of Jagadamba who is ravished by the lusty and atrocious cart man and her atonement by immersing herself in the holy river. When the cart man learns about Jagadamba's death, the sense of guilt shakes him and it is in this mood and on the basis of superstitious beliefs on which he has been nursed that he conjures up the vision of the ghost of Jagadamba which comes to reproach him on the very spot at which he has raped her.

*Immersion* is the story of three sins, and the three characters represent them. Akhileswaran is haunted by a sense of guilt because he was absent at the time of his father's demise. Jagadamba makes a feeble struggle and yields to the cart man's onslaught in semi-dazed condition. Afterwards she is overtaken by a tremendous sense of being polluted and decides that only through self-immolation can she wipe out her disgrace. She thinks that she was ceased to be a wife and a mother. "Blood once fouled is fouled forever, in the veins of wife, in the veins of mother." (Isvaran 58) The cart man represents a crime deliberately planned and executed. It is cold blooded. The three sins are as a result of passion, trickery and brutality and represent the three zones, Fire, Slime and Ice of Inferno, described by Dante.

The structural construction of the novel is superb. Isvaran combines both the past and the present into an organic whole. The past or the background of the story is provided in the reminiscences of the hero while the thoughts of the heroine emphasizes her guilt and the prediction of the kuratti reinforces the part played by Fate in the life of an individual. Hinduism, like many religions and beliefs, lays stress on the preordination of events. The event may be something foreseen because it happens as a result of one's past sins committed sometimes in the previous births and lives. This theme is highlighted by the recollection of the encounter of the kuratti by Jagadamba. The ravishment and the revenge take place in the deadness of night, a night specially chosen for such peculiar happenings while immersion, an act of atonement and fulfillment takes place in daylight. "Sex sows what death reaps." Death is not fearsome for a Hindu. It is the natural and inevitable end of life which none can avoid. The greatest expresses not his sadness but his happiness when he says "she has gone down a sumangali" (Isvaran 60). The circular aspect of life caught in a pool of births and deaths where everything in cyclic is brought forth by bringing the cart man's death at the same place where he has raped Jagadamba. At the beginning of the first chapter and the last chapter we have the same sentence – "The bullock cart moved on at a trotting pace." These words are specifically used to state that man reaches his place of destiny without the least awareness of what is in store for him, as Auden's poem "Musee Des Beaux Arts" tells us.

*Immersion* has a five-fold structure. The first few chapters serve as the exposition. The initial incident lies where Akhileswaran's thoughts mark out the purpose of the journey he is undertaking, and the rape. The crisis consists of the immersion of the heroine. Resolution describes the illness of Akhileswaran and finally the catastrophe in which the cart man's death is described. Space and time as in normal human experience are linked here. They constitute a continuum and the characters are trapped in the circular tune of the Universe where an action is followed by a reaction. Thus the novel has a symmetrical structure like a mathematical formula where one part balances the other. In the delineation of characters also this balance and equilibrium are maintained. The four characters can be taken as two pairs in which they stand to each other. Akhileswaran and Jagadamba are husband and wife and so naturally fall into a unit, while the cart man and priest are to

serve some service to the couple; the cart man to ride them to the railway station, and the priest to help them perform the funeral rites. So in the fulfillment of the functions the members within the two pairs have unity, but their similarity ends there. Akhileswaran is an introvert and is completely obsessed by the mission of immersion. He is an epitome of humanity and like Oedipus bears a sense of guilt borne out of circumstances. He thinks that he has failed to be a dutiful son. He does not for a moment think about the part played by Fate or Accident preventing him from being present near his father at the time of his death. He seems to be a character in a Greek play tormented by Fury. He does not care about his wife. As soon as he learns that the pot has fallen, he jumps out of the cart and runs back like a madman, miles and miles leaving his poor helpless wife under the protection of a lout, Jagadamba is more of a mother. She seems unconcerned about the pot but is worried about her young boy who is left at home. She puts herself strictly as a mother and a wife. This is the major difference between the two. The cart man and the priest have similarity in their quantum of service to the couple. But the way in which they act, one proving to be unfaithful while the other offers devoted service even at a risk, are contrasts or pairs in not one of identity and harmony, but also of contradiction. This generates a pattern of binary oppositions and arranges its emphases contrapuntally. This contrapuntal arrangement of emphases so pervades the novel that the text itself alternates between opposites. This binary opposition that underlies the novel organizes all other oppositions into a unified experience of absolute ambivalence between good and evil.

The story is narrated in the age old Indian tradition of storytelling, bordering the legendary, the mythical and the puranic. Both in theme and in the mode of narration, it is mythical, and so carries multiple meanings. "Akhileswaran (the word in Sanskrit literally means the Lord of all) is uncontaminated by distrust of suspicion; his simplicity keeps him above sin. Jagadamba (literally the mother of the Universe) is touched by the maya aspect, and contaminated by evil. She has to be purified through fire or water..." (Paniker 40).

The central theme of Isvaran's writing is the human being, the male and the female who are the fundamental creations of nature. This is the mechanism that works behind all development. The ancient shastras named the purusha or the male as the spirit of nature and prakriti, the female, as the matter, and both put together form the existence of human being, Akhileswaran means the Lord of the Universe, and Jagadamba, the mother Earth. *Immersion* presents the theme of the relation of God and the earth. The cart man represents man. Man injudiciously tampers with his environment. Mother Earth suffers as a result of man's vandalism. Akhileswaran remains a silent spectacle. Finally man's actions have their repercussions. He sows the seeds of destruction, which finally engulfs him and brings him to disaster and death. The novel thus sounds a warning to man who pollutes mother Earth.

The metaphysical content and the mood of reverie pervading the story are evoked first by a folk songs of Malabar, sung by the cart man. "When will the plant flower...." The song sets the author on psychological probe into the longing and romantic dreams and aspirations of the youth and provides hints on the possible and the probable. The second chapter contains the story of the 'Umbrella Stone' or 'Kodaikal.' The very sight of the stone prompts Akhileswaran to plunge into a reverie and seek to explore beneath the outward and trivial happenings, the immortal glory and nobility of human soul. Isvaran shows an introspective spirit and the high sensibility given to the enjoyment of the mystery of life.

In *Immersion* Isvaran combines the third person narration with the first person. Chapters three and four contain Akhileswaran's thoughts while chapter seven contains memories of Jagadamba the story of her accidental encounter with a kuratti who predicted about "a sort of contamination of the body." (Isvaran 44). In these instances Isvaran adopts the Stream of Consciousness Technique, allowing memories and visions to flow in an uninterrupted stream and recognizes the mere extended image of space becomes the pure essence of reality which may be described as "a succession of qualitative changes which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another" (Bergson 104).

The novel reveals the nature of Shakti or woman power. Woman was the Magna Mater and is the primum mobile. Jagadamba is the Adi Shakti or the feminine principle symbolizing the Life Force itself, boundless, untamable and terrible.

Characters in the novel are impressive, warm and pulsating individuals because everyone of them is caught in momentous choices and commitments, Characters represent gunas or predominant passions, sattva, rajas and tamas. Names and forms are identifying tags.

Jagadamb's tragedy is as a result of her incapacity or unwillingness to share her feelings with her partner. Here Isvaran shows a grasp of the psychological essentials. He realizes personality with unparalleled vividness and pictures the organic principles that underlie that personality. His characters have four kinds of meanings, psychological, social, ethical and spiritual. Jagadamba as a human being, exemplifies an actual psychological state. She presents a tradition bound world. The vice of the society acts through the cart man. The proverbial wisdom of the ancient world tells her that she is polluted and the means it suggests to her is redemption through immersion in the holy river. She suffers not for her folly but for the vice of society.

Thus the presentation of a theme based on the Hindu ethos; the delineation of characters as psychological studies; the employment of a narrative technique which combines the puranic and the modern; the stance of fantasia in the guise of the fairy tale writing; a successful recreation of Hindu beliefs and superstitions; a skillful construction of character, situation and incidents; a complex weaving back and forth in time; an effective use of idea, image and symbol; a poetic evocation of the spirit of place and finally a graphic presentation of Indian womanhood make *Immersion* a memorable work of art. The novel takes us to two levels of understanding *vyavaharikasatya*, the truth of our phenomenal existence and *paramardhikasatya*, the holistic truth and the two subserve each other to make *Immersion* a piece of *tattvajnana*, the knowledge and experience of the ultimate truth.

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