KUVEMPU—THE NOVELIST

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Awake, arise, O listen
The Call of the Revolution!

I

The long-awaited day is dawning. The linguistic provinces are in the offing. And with it comes the necessity of introducing and interpreting the great writers of each regional language to the others.

Kuvempu is—if we may borrow a phrase from the cricket field—the greatest all-rounder in the field of Kannada Letters at present. He is a poet and playwright; a critic and biographer; a novelist and short-story writer. Above all, he is the composer of the greatest epic in Kannada today, and was rightly awarded the Academy prize by the Central Government. Indeed, he has never touched any form of literature that he has not adorned.

Kuvempu has but one novel to his credit, but what a novel! It is a veritable saga of the Malnad people. It is a cosmic epic in prose. Like Sterne and Goldsmith in English literature, Kuvempu could be certain of his place in Kannada Literature, even if he had not written anything else. But it is not these eighteenth century English novelists that he reminds us when we are reading his novel; it is Hardy, that reputed master of the regional novel, and Tolstoy, the Russian with the cosmic vision, that we are reminded of when we are glancing through the pages of Kuvempu’s novel, Kanuru Heggadithi. Here, as in Hardy, we see how a provincial literature can shed its localism, and acquire the hallmark of true universality, in the hands of a great writer.

Kanuru Heggadithi pictures the life of a people living in the hilly regions of Karnataka. To that extent, its canvas appears to be limited. It has plenty of local colour. The local dialect is freely used to make the novel realistic. The local customs and superstitions are often interwoven to make the texture of the novel true to life. But all this does not prevent the novelist from depicting the fundamental problems in life, and the elemental passions of mankind. For, like all great classical writers Kuvempu possesses ‘a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal, and of the timeless and the temporal together’.

II

The novel deals with the return of the native from the collegiate life in Mysore to the rural life in Malnad. Huvaiah, like Clym in Hardy’s novel, is an idealist who believes in bringing about a silent revolution in the lives of his village people through proper education. His uncle’s

1 The title of the novel has been changed from Kanuru Subbamma Heggadithi, to Kanuru Heggadithi in the third edition.
refusal to send him back to Mysore for further studies, makes him settle down in his native village, and change its very face by his magnetic influence and missionary zeal.

The story centres round three families—those of Chandraiah Gowda of Kanuru, Singappa Gowda of Seethemane, and Shamaiah Gowda of Muthalli. They are all inter-related, and want to strengthen their bonds of blood by a few more marriage alliances among the younger generation.

Hüvaiah, the nephew of Chandraiah, loves Seetha, the daughter of Shamaiah; and she reciprocates his love. But they are too shy to speak of it to their elders, and hence a series of misunderstandings arise, culminating in the marriage of Seetha with Hüvaiah's cousin Ramaiah, after the death of Singappa's son Krishnappa at the hands of a tiger. It is this tragic tale of broken love that forms the core of the novel; and it is in showing the 'how' and 'why' of it, that the novelist depicts a complete picture of the people of Malnad—their strength as well as their weakness, their passions and their superstitions.

As a contrast to the unhappy marriage of Ramaiah with Seetha, which results in so much suffering for Seetha, and the premature death of Ramaiah, we have two happy marriages depicted—in those of Vasu (Ramaiah’s younger brother) with Lakshmi (Seetha’s younger sister); and Chinnaiah (Seetha’s brother) with Puttamma (Ramaiah’s sister). But the marriage that ought to set every reader thinking is the third marriage of Chandraiah Gowda—an old man of about fifty perhaps, with a grown up son like Ramaiah studying in the college, and two other children by his second wife—with poor Subbamma, a girl in teens. It is this ill-assorted marriage that vitiates the whole atmosphere of Kanur, and results in the ghastly death of the young lady. Who was responsible for her going astray after the death of her old husband? If it was Gange who introduced her to the line, who was responsible for making Gange what she was? After all she was not a born prostitute. Who can forget her heart-rending tale? How far is society responsible for the actions of Gange and Subbamma?

III

Such questions are posed in the novel, but not directly. For, Kuvempu is every inch an artist, and does not believe in making his novel a propaganda piece, like those of the so-called ‘Progressive School’. He has an integrated vision of life, and depicts every aspect of it in proper proportion. He has universal sympathy, and portrays the peon Ninga with as much sympathy and understanding as he portrays the idealist hero, Hüvaiah, in whom many a reader might detect the projection of the artist's personality. Really, it is a delight to glance through the galaxy of pen-portraits we get in the novel. If the picture of Gowramma, the ideal mother of Seetha, is rendered with exquisite grace, the picture of Rangappa Setty is rendered with complete fidelity to life.
It is as though the novelist, like Chaucer in English literature, can 'see beauty in ugliness'. Like Chaucer again, he succeeds in individualising the worthy Gowdas when they are all assembled to witness the partition of the ancestral property at Kanuru.

The art of description is in the blood of Kuvempu. He describes characters in action with as much felicity as he describes the still ones. Seetha dressing herself up on the day of Hüvaiah’s arrival, and Subbamma working hard in her father’s house after quitting her husband, are but two such examples. Then we have the graphic descriptions of the quarrel between Subbamma and Nagamma in the early part of the novel; and that between Subbamma and Gange in the latter part. And as for the description of incidents, they are too many and too varied to be summed up in an article. But some of them challenge our attention. The description of Annaiah Gowda’s poverty is simply heart-rending. The description of the toddy shop is thought-provoking, specially when the novelist says, ‘as the drink began to vanish, the beast in man began to rise’. The description of the sacrifice of the goat, and its timely escape, is very revealing. The description of the marriage of Ramaiah with Seetha is simply shocking—the seat of marriage as the funeral pyre! The inhuman punishments inflicted upon Seetha on her refusal to live as Ramaiah’s wife are just heart-breaking. The change of heart in Chandraiah Gowda and his final good-bye to Hüvaiah is very touching. The ghastly death of Subbamma and Ramaiah is really shocking. But the last scene in the novel is elevating.

And in this elevating scene, the novelist is as much concerned with the description of persons as with their setting. But this can be said of the complete novel. Kuvempu takes delight in describing Nature in all its aspects. Like Wordsworth and Hardy, he is a romantic in his attitude to Nature. To him Nature is not merely a collection of trees, streams and mountains; it is an influence on man. Nature is not only a stage set for the enacting of human drama, but it is also the friend, philosopher and guide of man. Nature, in Kuvempu’s novel—even as in Hardy’s—is not merely an influence but a character. The novelist delights in depicting the influence of this divine character on the mind of Hüvaiah whenever he is depressed. It is as though Hüvaiah is a child of Nature and runs to the bosom of his mother whenever he is in distress. Kuvempu, himself a child of Nature, is at his best when he is describing the grandeur and glory of Nature in such chapters as Parvathasṛṅgadalli Sūryodaya Soudaryanubhūthi (The experience of Beauty at the dawn in the mountainous region).

IV

This famous chapter in the novel reminds us that Kuvempu is essentially a poet. His approach to life, as well as to literature, is essentially poetic. Like Hardy, he started his literary career as a poet, and then switched on to prose. Now he is writing in both prose and verse, but
even his prose is often poetic. His novel reveals to us that he can write poetic prose; and what is more, that he can see poetry in what is generally considered to be the prosaic lives of the poor people.

It is the poor that have obviously stirred the heart of the novelist. How else can we explain his sympathetic rendering of characters like Ninga, Byra, Thimma, Jackey, Sidda, Puttanna and a host of others? They are like the rustics portrayed by Hardy in his novels—with this difference, that they are of a different time and clime. But is there any difference at all? Is not human nature the same everywhere, and at all times? These rustics are closest to Nature and embody the elemental feelings and aspirations of man. They are raw men, the foundation of all society. They cement the relations between the warring camps—be it between two families, or two generations. They naively comment upon and criticise the actions of their masters; and often supply a humorous note.

Yes, Kuvempu is not without a sense of humour. Who can forget the words of Ninga, carrying the books of Hůvaiah, feeling tired, and exclaiming how Hůvaiah’s ‘one small head could carry all he knew!’ Or again, little Lakshmi weeping and saying: ‘call me again, and I’ll come’. Instances can easily be multiplied, but suffice it to note that the novelist has a very fine sense of humour which never degenerates into boisterousness or indecency.

Speaking of indecency, one cannot help observing how some of the modern Kannada novelists have mistaken their English counterparts, and begun to parade obscene scenes as being highly realistic in their novels. As Galsworthy rightly retorted, life does not consist only of going to bed with a woman. There is an artistic way of suggesting even the immorality, and we find it done delicately by Kuvempu in his novel. How suggestively the seduction of Obaiah by Gange is depicted! Or again, the fall of Subbamma—there is nothing obscene in the chapter describing Rangappa’s conquest of Subbamma; though the consequences of it are described in all their ghastliness. Younger novelists would do well to emulate Kuvempu when they are treading on this delicate ground.

Kuvempu is a novelist with a vision. His vision is embedded in the final chapter of the novel. He knows that in this eternal conflict between the old and the young, the young are sure to triumph if they are inspired by high ideals. Hůvaiah is an immortal example of that. He shows by example and precept how the youth of the country are the hope of the nation. And this message of hope, we will do well to carry to all parts of the nation—nay, to all corners of the world—by interpreting this great writer not merely in cold print, but also in living pictures. Is it too much to hope that this great epic of the common man will one day be screened, and applauded throughout the world?