
Ankur Betageri’s *Bhog and Other Stories* can be considered as an anthology of life’s emptiness, examined from a sociological-cum-psychological perspective. Existence becomes painful for humans due to gross poverty, as is explicit in the story ‘Bhog’. Some stories are bitter, extremist and near surrealist. He has dealt with all the present-day existential problems of contemporary man, the trials and tribulations which humanity has to face.

Some stories, like ‘Big Bear Remembers Kako’, can be considered as heroic examples of human courage and endurance. Betageri lets the characters expose themselves in true Chaucerian fashion, and the reader is at times left wondering at his clinical efficiency in dealing with the characters. The story ‘A Record of the Fag End and Aftermath of a Broken Love Affair’ reflects a general demise of human relations.

The stories exude a highly disturbing and unsettling feeling. The author has employed a creatively innovative armory of dismantling power and unsettling ambience. ‘Atmaram Harbhaji’ is an incongruous mingling of the banal with the bizarre, highlighting the degenerate and perverted ethos of a demonic society. Demonic cravings existing in an evil society produce a chaotic and dystopian existence.

The story ‘The Big Bicycle’ depicts man’s psychological struggle in a world in which all values are suspect and all attempts to achieve identity are subject to frustration. ‘The Armour’ gives a pen-portrait of modern-day existence which has proved to be totally futile in all its attempts to gain credibility. Consequently, the story demonstrates the tragic failure of modern man to nurture and to assert his unique selfhood.

‘The Armour: An Allegory’ uses powerful symbolism to describe death. The human body is likened to a prison, and the seven vices that influence and empower the prison are redefined as youth, madness, sickness, beauty, rage, love and silence. We spend our whole life blindly running after these and forget the true meaning of life and existence. We all know that we are mortal and one day will leave this earth for the heavenly abode. But we forget this stark reality and start fighting with the seven armours. It’s only in old age that we realise the reality:

But with age you leak out the holes and slits of armour like water. Again you have to face the bars with lions raging around. You know for sure that you are moving towards them – flowing towards them – towards those tongues waiting to lap you. (2)

It is implied that death is waiting for you just as the lions are ready to pounce at their prey at the very sight of it. Death is a predator and there is no escape from it. Betageri refers to the Hindu custom of burning bodies after death. When we die we become mere memories, and our armour is left behind: at the time of death fighting for beauty, love, and youth all seem trivial. He explicitly highlights the bitter truth of life and existence. Even existence becomes a non-entity after death. This cycle goes on and on. The futility of human existence is wonderfully explained in this allegory.

In the story ‘Malavika’, the writer has tried to show the dilemma of present generation which is confused and not focused on their priorities in life:

The strange fact was that though she had earned good marks in high school and had come to Bangalore to study she wasn’t much interested in studies … Most of her free
time was spent lazing around in shopping malls. … Where to park the car … which are the best places to hang out in MG Road … she either knew these things or showed keen interest in knowing them. (101)

Through lack of proper guidance and failing to taking life seriously, today’s generation ends up wasting their precious lives, giving rise to feelings of loneliness, despondency and hopelessness. Malavika says:

Have you ever felt this way? As if life had suddenly drained all meaning: as if everything had become meaningless for no reason … A deep, tormenting feeling that you can’t bear the burden of living anymore. (105)

Her tone reflects dissonance and despair. The present generation is directionless and doesn’t know what will be the outcome of their lives. Life is ambiguous without any solutions. The futility exhibited in this story makes us ponder and search for the solution to this riddle called life.

In all, Betageri’s stories display an assortment of existential problems that human beings face in the modern world. Remedies need to be found, otherwise the situation will become worse and lead to a doomsday for which humans are themselves responsible. He highlights the topsy-turvy world which left unattended could lead to a stifling existence, but although his vision is tragic throughout, he leaves scope for solutions and improvements, and offers hope to humankind.

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