Unknowable or Comprehensible –
Two Attitudes to Life and Death in
Modern Hindi Prose

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Abstract
The paper deals with the approach of Hindi literature to understanding the nature of God through the realization of the nature of Life and Death. The focus is on two novels by two prominent novelists: Apne-apne ajnabi (To Each His Stranger, 1961) by Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayana “Ajneya” (or “Agyeya”, 1911–1987) and Ai, larki (Hey, Girl!, 1991) by Kṛṣṇā Sobtī (b. 1925).

The main characters in Ajneya’s prose are often people who oppose conservative society and experience a feeling of exclusion and detachment from the common world. In his early stories the characters are based on events from the Russian revolution, and in his later creations are lonely heroes. Some of Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s heroines could also be understood as marginal characters, but they try to overcome this marginality and sometimes work actively to reach their goal. As a rule, they finally succeed. The reader is left with a feeling that Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s heroines’ attitudes to life on the whole are very positive.

In my paper I proceed from the assumption that the creations of both writers combine a western and an Indian approach to understanding and representing the world. The novels look very similar in composition, in the construction of the main characters, and in the way they highlight key elements. But Ajneya and Kṛṣṇā Sobtī in these novels reached practically opposite results depicting their protagonists in the margin between Life and Death, in search of God, attempting to understand the meaning of their existence. For Yoke, one of Ajneya’s heroines, rebellion against the world and against God is practically the only way to realize Truth. Rebellion is her existential choice. At the same time the writer presents Selma as an alternative heroine.

The novel by Kṛṣṇā Sobtī, written about 30 years later than Ajneya’s, might be viewed as a woman-writer’s attempt to subvert Ajneya’s existentialist pattern. The interplay between the two texts seems to me very important for understanding the attitude of both writers to the challenges that life and death pose to human beings.

Keywords: Hindi novel, women’s writing, Hinduism, existentialism, Life and Death, Ajneya, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī

1. “Eternal questions”, a quest for God and Indian literature
Are Life and Death unknowable or can they be comprehended? What should be one’s attitude towards them? Both questions appear to be strongly connected with a quest for God, which continues to be one of the most important themes of world literature. The quest for God is associated with the pursuit of truth and with so-called eternal questions – who are we, where do we come from, and where are we going? In the past, a religious person would have an answer for these questions, but thinkers and philosophers would not accept a set explanation. Instead they would continue their pursuit of the truth, which was somehow also reflected in literature. The interpretation of the theme and the responses to existential challenges changed radically in the 19th and 20th centuries, when literature began to reflect on the inner world of the hero and later entered into the epoch of “the death of God,” as the famous statement of Friedrich Nietzsche goes.
Modern Indian literature investigates the question of whether or not God is comprehensible by searching in two main directions, as I see it. In the first case, God, or a sense of the divine, is accepted as an unquestioned fact, according to the status of a person as Hindu, Jain, Muslim, or member of another community. Growing up, the person develops a certain identity and religious consciousness and some kind of devotion to this or that God. This kind of identity is taken for granted, and only some radical changes in a person’s or society’s life could lead to a personal urge to search for God on an individual path or even force him/her to convert. In the Indian context, the multitude of religious traditions leads to constant trans-religious interaction among different conceptions and ideas, traditions, holy places, rituals, habits, and so on. Since the times of Medieval Bhakti the question of whether God is present in the temple or rather in the heart of the devotee has constantly been under discussion; whether God is to be reached through the path of love, through individual service, adoration, and proper or good deeds, through the path of knowledge, or by performing rituals and strictly following traditions. Modern Hindi literature to some extent continues to discuss such questions. At the same time for a person living in the late 20th and early 21st century, in an age of constantly growing alienation and isolation of the individual, the dimensions of this pursuit appear to be particularly complex.

In general, I think, Hindi literature answers the question “Is God alive?” positively. To my mind, Ajneya’s *Apne-apne aijnabī (To each his stranger*, 1961) and Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s *Ai, larkī (Hey, Girl!,* 1991) clearly represent an approach to and a perception of Life and Death, an attitude toward and an acceptance of God in the Hindi Literature of the second part of the 20th century. In this article I will try to compare these two novels by two prominent Hindi writers who – each in his or her own way – were very much concerned with the above mentioned issues.

From the very beginning of Ajneya’s literary career, the main hero of his prose was a person following the path of “Resistance and rebellion” and experiencing a feeling of exclusion from the common world. Some of Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s heroines also could be understood as marginal (Mitro Marjani of “*Mitro Marjānī,*” Ratti of *Sūrajmukhī andhere ke – “Sunflowers in Darkness” or Mahak Banu of *Dil-o-dāniś – “Heart and Mind”*), but they try to overcome this marginality and sometimes reach their goal through rebellion, or at least through clear and open protest. And this protest may be against God as well.

The main characters of both writers express their rebellious or marginal natures in different ways, and the reasons for their rebelliousness and marginality also differ. The main difference, to my understanding, is that Ajneya is mainly interested in the scope of his protagonist and his relations between him and society as a whole, while in most of Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s novels, a heroine is opposed to her family as a part of the community/society. At the same time, both writers’ main characters think about existential questions while trying to find a reason for living or dying. Ajneya shows this way of thinking overtly, using a diary or inner monologue of a hero who usually acts only after a deep reflection. In contrast to this, many heroines of Kṛṣṇā Sobtī are not

1 An English translation of this novel was published under the title *The Heart Has Its Reasons*. Translated by Reema Anand and Meenakshi Swami. New Delhi: Katha 2005.
such profound thinkers; instead they often are common women who lead usual, everyday lives. Many of them act spontaneously, without much consideration. Nevertheless the author skillfully shows that even an ordinary person cannot avoid the quest for truth and for God. Her heroines live, act, and talk about life; in this way they are able to understand or accept God and the end of life. This end may be called death, but it need not mean “a complete end”, “eternal emptiness.” It is “a liberation of a body and a soul” (dehām kā nistārā)² and finally Īīlā, divine play created and led by God.

In opposition to this, Ajneya’s heroine Yoke, for example, starts thinking and then comes to the conclusion that “Death is the only form of perception and knowledge of God.”³ She reflects on this mystery (rahasya) and wonders why “a cemetery for one and a liberation of another happen at one and the same moment” (ek kā madfān aur dāsre kā nistār ek sāth ek hī kṣāṇ meṃ hotā hai).⁴ This word – a mystery, rahasya – also represents some kind of a margin which attracts the heroine and leads her to deeper reflections. Only then she will act – in a way which would not be possible or even thinkable for Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s heroines.

It is interesting that both novels display practically identical plots in many sections and have very similar settings of protagonists. They are both women, one young, one old, standing – or placed – at the threshold of Life and Death. The old one is waiting for Death, the young one is a witness, but not a passive one. She also takes an active part: she helps and cares for a dying woman or reflects on and tests the situation to find a reason for what is happening to her and the other character. This position – especially as it is represented in the novels – makes a discussion on the problem of attaining or losing God inevitable.

2. Ajneya’s and Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s novels: similarity or difference

In the novels we can find rather similar points of view on the main problems discussed by the authors through the representation of their heroines. In both novels, the narration is mainly achieved through the 1st person narration or a dialog on life and death, relations between generations and relatives, eternity and momentariness, transience of existence, etc. One of the reasons for this, to my understanding, is the composition of the novels and the special atmosphere the writers create for their heroines. It is a clean world – with a minimum of common, everyday details – yet at the same time not “laboratory sterile”. In their own world the heroines can discuss and consider eternal problems, to find a sense and meaning for being or not being.

The theme of the existence of God, as I understand it, is the main problem of these two novels. What is the role of the divine in the life of an individual and society? What are Life and Death? The authors, each in their own way, reach different conclusions. The difference can perhaps be explained with reference to the Indian – especially Hindu – mentality, in the case of Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s novel Ai, lārkī. This is also confirmed by her novel Dīlo-dāniś, in which Hinduism and Islam coexist and

³ Maut īī hī tā sāth kā ekmātr pahcānā jā saknevālā rūp hai (Ajneya 2001:41).
⁴ Ajneya 1961: 80.
confront each other. Ajneya shows a more Europe-oriented point of view, based on Christian views and with a somewhat Buddhist undercurrent, although it is not primarily focused on religion, but rather on philosophy. Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s main heroine – the old dying Mother– Ammu/Amnijī – represents the Indian perspective (Hinduism as a way of life). For her, the existence of Hindu gods is just a fact of reality and she abandons life contentedly. She knows that her life will be continued by her daughter’s life: “By giving birth to a daughter a mother will live forever…”. 5

Ajneya was very much influenced by Marxism and by the Russian revolutionary movement. This is particularly visible in his first collection of stories Vipathagā (“She who follows a wrong path”), written in a Delhi jail (published in 1937) and in his first novel Śekhar: ek jīvanī – “Śekhar: a biography” (1941 – 44). In his early stories we meet Russian characters, like Maria Ivanovna in the title story of the collection, Vipathagā, or three friends Maxim, Leon, and Anton in Vivek se baṛhkar (“Above a mind, a reason”) and the three friends Nikolay, Sergey, and Dmitriy in Milan (“A meeting”). It is worth noticing that all these characters are foreigners (like the characters of his last mentioned novel, apart from Jagannathan – a stranger who will appear in the final episode of Apne–apne ajnabī). Plots of Ajneya’s three early stories are taken from the history of the Russian revolutionary movement. It was a world of atheism opposing Christianity. These stories were written in the 1930s. In the Forties came Śekhar – the hero of Ajneya’s first novel.

After his dramatic personal experiences in prison and his subsequent period of disillusionment, Ajneya took a great interest in Buddhism and in French existentialism. His last novel Apne-apne ajnabī can be understood as a demonstration of an European approach to the problem of God, 6 but in two variants. Selma, one of the heroines, an old woman with faith in God, dies content. In contrast to her is a young heroine, Yoke, who makes her “existential” choice. Yoke spends several weeks alone with the dying Selma in a small, isolated cottage high in the mountains, cut off from the outer world by snow. They have long discussions during this period, and when Yoke is finally released, she prefers death as her choice. In the narration we come to know that she was forced to become a prostitute – veśyā –in a town occupied by the Germans during World War II, and for her this meant “Yoke has died” (Yoke mar gayī). The heroine chooses a new name – Mariam: “Mariam never dies” (Mariam kabhī naḥīṃ martī). 7 Nevertheless, the young heroine commits suicide at the end of the novel.

The reader is left to think about why her choice was exactly this and not another, why Yoke constantly repeated that she had made her choice of her own free will. 8 This choice – just like the life of Yoke as a whole could be interpreted as a clear illustration of the existentialist philosophical conceptions of “critical points”, “border

6 Annie Montaut discussed this very popular opinion regarding Ajneya in her article “Western Influence on Hindi Literature: a Dialogical Process: Agyeya’s Apne-apne ajnabī”(Montaut 1992). I will return to the article later. Even in the Encyclopaedia of The Hindu World Ganga Ram Garg (ed.), New Delhi 1992, the novel was characterized as “an existentialist work describing the psychological state of two women who are besieged in a house buried under snow” (Garg 1992: 234).
situations” or a “problem of choice”. If so, the reader can apprehend the novel as a dialog between Ajneya and European philosophers—from Heidegger to Sartre.9 Most readers followed this way, and it certainly helps in understanding the novel.

At the same time, the reader can read Apne-apne ajnabī as a literary creation, paying attention to each and every small detail. If we choose this way of reading, then we should concentrate on the “mirror” structure of the novel and compare the lives and behavior of Selma and Yoke, recollect the times and places when and where their lives unfolded. Moreover we should think of Ajneya as not making a "modern, fashionable choice" when writing his novel at a time when the philosophy of existentialism was at the peak of its popularity, but rather appreciate the writer’s constant pursuit of truth and striving for a proper choice between right and wrong, honesty, and dishonesty; loyalty and betrayal.

The setting of the novel is a situation very similar to that which can be found in his early story Vivek se barhkar. This story is set in the plains of Siberia, covered by snow, and is easily comparable to the snowy mountains of Apne-apne ajnabī. Here the protagonists make their choice not to betray their friend, and die exclaiming “Russia! Long live the revolution!”10 Šekhar, the hero of Ajneya’s first novel, also comes across such “border situations” and is “re-born.” This happens in a prison, where he has the support of other prisoners. After some time, Šekhar accepts a new life—not that of a terrorist but of a religious person.

It is noteworthy that in Apne-apne ajnabī the two main heroines have counterparts in two male secondary characters. In the narration, Selma Dolberg is connected to Yan Ekelof, in an episode that takes place in 1906, about 40 years before Selma and Yoke meet; as for Yoke, she has her friend Paul. Contrary to the heroines, who are strangers to each other, these male personages are not lonely. Yan, in a crucial situation on the ruins of a bridge,11 when only three persons survived after a catastrophic flood and an earthquake, keeps in touch with another secondary character, a photographer. Paul, with whom Yoke had planned to spend Christmas vacations, finally comes with his friends to rescue her. In this way the male personages represent the outer world; they are not alone in it, not isolated; even after a disaster they search for a social community, personal contact with someone else. In the same way, in Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s novel, three male characters (Son, Brother in law, and Doctor) represent Life and Help coming from the outside to a closed female world, where women are isolated in their quest for understanding the nature of Life and Death.

Marginality is expressed on many levels in Apne-apne ajnabī. The margin itself confirms that everything in the world is tightly connected and cannot exist without each other. There are oppositions, so a border between them is inevitable. Let us consider, for example, spatial opposition: there are plains and mountains, a small house set on the central part of a bridge where Selma lives between two other split

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11 This old bridge is described in the novel as a very big one, with shops where shopkeepers also live. For me, as a reader, this bridge resembles Ponto Veccio in Florence.
parts, and a lonely cottage situated high in the mountains. Time is seen as a force majeure opposing a normal way of life: flow of water associated with pralaya, an earthquake, a snowfall, the Second World War. Elsewhere it is Christmas Eve, meaning a turning point, a boundary both in a religious and a natural context (solstice). There is an opposition between Light and Darkness – two symbols of Life and Death: sunshine and sun beams opposed to darkness and night, in a hill cottage isolated from its surrounding by white snow.

Selma feels that she has been left all alone, in opposition to the whole world, and in the 1906’ episode she does not feel any compassion towards the two other men or unity with them in the face of death. She has to find confirmation through her own life experience that she is all alone in the universe before she begins her quest for God and she finds God in compassion and love. But, before the heroine gets an answer, she must to overcome the margin, perform a rite of passage. It is understood in the novel that only marginal situations, not common ones, can create conditions for understanding whether Life and Death are unknowable or are comprehensible, whether God can be reached or not.

Yoke – in contrast to Selma – does not manage to convince herself of the existence of God, and that is the reason why she finally commits suicide. The last scene of the novel is very important and clarifying. Before leaving this mortal world, Yoke adopts the Judeo-Christian name Mariam and confesses to a Hindu man named Jagannāthan. Not only has she chosen the time of her own death (when she met “a good man” whom she could not regard as a stranger), but she consciously chose for herself the name of God’s Mother, the Virgin Mary. What is more important, the chosen “good man” is a person whom she could trust and ask for forgiveness. In the same way, Selma had asked Yoke to forgive her before she died. “I have chosen. We do not choose a stranger, we choose a good man. In him I will live. Nathan, forgive me.” For Yoke, this “good man” is Jagannāthan. He had forgiven Mariam, not actually knowing for what, maybe for her strange, provocative behavior in a shop where they had met by chance, and he was chosen by Yoke-Mariam. This is a reciprocal act: She does the same – she “forgives” him. In this way, a particular continuity is established. Yoke-Mariam also forgives somebody else (usko bhī) and Jagannāthan manages to find out that this is not Paul, Yoke’s friend (she calls him “a stranger”), but God who is named by Yoke-Mariam as “īśvar” “the Lord.”

Yoke-Mariam dies with the name of God on her lips. In the Hindu tradition this is very important, as in the bhakti tradition it has meant salvation at the time of death since time immemorial. However, the rebellious Yoke opposes God by committing suicide. Earlier she was even ready to commit a mortal sin – to kill Selma after staying with her in their “snow prison” for a long time. The end of the novel sug-
gests that Yoke is free to choose between Life and Death, and that maybe after Death she will know the truth. Some of Yoke’s reflections regarding this subject, so important for her, can be found in her diary, in an entry dated 6 January.

We should note that the time setting is the Orthodox Christian Christmas Eve. In general, the novel is based on Christian symbolism. The reader knows that Selma is a Christian; the names of two male personages of the novel, Paul and Yan (Ioan) also carry Christian overtones. Even the last action – though not the final word of the novel – is a sign of the cross that an unknown old man makes towards empty skies (śūne akiś men). The sign also looks like a stranger in the empty sky, bringing a reader back to the title of the novel “To Each His Stranger.” So we can interpret the novel by Ajneya not only as an “existentialist” novel, but also as a symbolic enactment of a kind of Christian quest for God.

This “empty and open” end of the novel provides an opportunity to propose different interpretations of the meaning of the novel itself. In my opinion, Yoke-Mariam’s behavior confirms that the first and final wish of a living being, towards the end of life, is to be alive. Any individual naturally wants a continuation, wants to be preserved in one way or another. Even if a person is a stranger to herself, as in the novel by Ajneya, she should find “a good one” – so that life can continue, go on, even after she personally does not exist physically. A person can neither exist nor perish into non-existence alone; someone is required to share, accompany, and support her life and death experience. Ajneya skillfully cites a śloka by Bhartrihari “bhogā na bhuktā vayam eva bhuktāḥ” applying it to a modern context. “Akele vāḥ bhoge bhugtā hī nahīn.”, “if enjoyed alone, it cannot be enjoyed” (tr. by Annie Montaut 1991: 128). This “good man” could have any name, God, or īśvar, or Jagannāthan, or Buddha. The last name was not mentioned in the novel but there were many indirect hints of Buddhism. The name is just a sign, not comprehensible for some, but full of sense for others.

Certainly, Ajneya himself was one of those who understand themselves basically as seekers for the eternal truth. It is also worth noticing that his B.Sc. degree was obtained from Forman Christian College in Lahore (in 1929). Naturally, as an author, he could not give a definite answer to any of the eternal questions. Still, they form the basis of his mental and literary world. No doubt, his own life experience was a basis for creating the characters of his novels and stories. Sentenced to imprisonment for conspiracy in colonial times, he himself had plenty of time to reflect on Life, Death, and God.

Like Rabindranath Tagore, Ajneya was a cosmopolitan, interested in the world’s cultural and religious experience, not only that of the Hindu world. May be this is one of the reasons why his works attract the attention of readers and scholars; they are perhaps more readily appreciated by non-Indian readers than other pieces of Hindi literature. And this is also one of the ways “not to be alone.” We can find confirmation of it also through an analysis of the names of Ajneya’s heroes: Selma from the last novel corresponds to Sister Hilda, a character in his early short story Vivek

se baṛhkar. Old Selma’s surname is Ekelov, which closely resembles akeli or akele – “alone.” This word is often connected with Selma, thus Yoke is left after Selma’s death—without this old woman—herself akeli.  

The heroine’s reflections about Life and Death fit together with this: she compares them to a closed fist and an open palm, or recollects a story about a monk who dug a tunnel from his solitary monastic cell only to find in the end another closed lonely cell. We should also keep in mind that in 1957–58 the writer traveled to Japan. The dedication – Jīn Lain kī smṛti ko (“To the memory of Jīn Lain”) – confirms that the novel has an international, open appeal, going beyond margins and borders.

There is one more resemblance between Ajneya and Tagore. Tagore created the notion of Jibon-debota – the God of Life. In every natural creature he saw an expression and manifestation of this God. But Tagore himself had to go through a long process of reflection and searching for God, and make many attempts in order to understand the nature of Life and Death and express them in his literary creations.

It is an irony and a small paradox, even a rahasya (“mystery”), that Ajneya’s last novel, even though labeled by an Indian critic not to be “regarded as very satisfactory,” even after so many years attracts the attention of both general readers (I use the 17th paperback edition) and scholars—both in India and abroad. For example, Annie Montaut’s seminal article shows that the novel is a good example of the “dialogical relation between western (existentialist) and Indian poles,” which appealed to readers in the 1960s. It could be understood that Ajneya, while discussing eternal questions and philosophical problems, was somehow far ahead of his own time.

In Soviet Russia, Ajneya was considered a “modernist”, an epithet that at that time meant “decadent”, deserving of disdain; nevertheless, his poetry and prose attracted the attention of Indologists. Soviet scholar Svetlana Eminova dedicated a chapter in her book “Tradition and Innovation in Modern Indian Prose” to novels by Ajneya and particularly to Apne-apne ajnabī. She concluded her analysis of the novel by conceding with the opinion of many Indian critics (Devraj, Induprakash Randeya, Prabhakar Machve) who characterized the novel as “existential and modernistic.” Comparing “To Each His Stranger” with two previous novels by Ajneya, S. Eminova stressed that “an exploitation of naked devices inevitably leads to the deconstruction of the artistic texture of a creation. A philosophic task is accomplished, but it has led to the creation of a particularly “esoteric” piece of literature and the writer was branded as “elitist.”

In the Soviet times, such a characterization did not sound as a negative to a “knowing, a specially prepared reader” but rather like an invitation to read the novel and learn more about the author. As for my per-

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19 Ajneya 1961: 79.
20 In this connection see Н.А.Вишневская 2010: 20–56. The Russian Indologist Natalia Vishnevskaya wrote her article “A Man between Life and Death”, based mainly on creations of R. Tagore, and discussed the problem thoroughly.
21 Ram Awadh Dwivedi. A Critical Survey of Hindi Literature. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1967 (cit. by Montaut 1992: 118). In my personal conversations with Indian critics and professors of Literature, as well some Russian Indologists, the same opinion was expressed.
personal opinion, I think that this novel should be considered not only a logical result of Ajneya’s artistic development, but also a landmark of Hindi literature, as it stated out some directions and trends further developed in the creations of later Hindi writers.

Like the novel by Ajneya, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s Ai, larkī to some extent can be regarded as prayogvādi, experimental. I would dare characterize it as “a nazira,” as opposed to Ajneya’s Apne-apne ajnābī (even the titles rhyme a little bit, and these two novels are practically of the same length), written 30 years later. Though the writer herself calls the book a novel, in fact it looks more like a play with lines spoken by three heroines and a minimum of comments by the author. The two protagonists are mother (Ammū) and daughter, Girl (Laṛkī); there is also one other character – a maid, Susan; she addresses Ammū as Ammījī and the girl – respectfully as Dīdī. The name Susan sounds like a Christian name – one more indication of the closeness of the two novels discussed here. We can call Ai, Laṛkī a woman-writer’s novel about women. The plot also has an autobiographical background, however Kṛṣṇā Sobtī insisted that the main heroine did not represent her mother only, but that several persons were combined there. “Besides, it is Mother (Māṃ) who is the soul of this creation.” Actually, this “lāṃbī kahānī” (“long story”), as K.B. Vaid called the novel, according to my understanding, is a very serious, multi-level creation, considering practically the same problems which had been discussed by Ajneya.

Like Yoke and Selma, Ammū and the “girl” are waiting for Death to come – mother is very ill and two girls are taking care of her, not leaving a small house (or a flat). The main action takes place in Mother’s room. The girl goes out to fetch something, but very soon returns to listen to Mother’s memories. When Larkī goes out for a while, the room becomes “empty” (beraunak) for Ammū. The only other character is a doctor, who comes for a short visit. There is a connection with the outer world – by phone. Members of a “large family” (Son and Ammū’s brother in law) and the doctor sometimes call, but they usually talk with Laṛkī. In contrast to the world of Ajneya’s novel – dark, cold, snowy, without any hope of escape and with a very small ray of sunlight which Selma did not manage to see before her death – the atmosphere in Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s novel is light, in both senses of the word. Nevertheless, Ammū demands more light and becomes angry if a lamp is turned off. There are gusts of wind and fresh air, the twittering of birds and reminiscences, memories, recollections – as if Mother wants to give her whole life to her daughter and in this way to preserve and continue it. The time of the novel (if we do not include the

24 Kṛṣṇā Sobtī in conversation with Kṛṣṇa Baldev Vaid, characterized Ai, larkī as belonging to the novel genre (upanyās, Sobtī-Vaid 2007: 72), despite this creation lacking some of the common characteristics of a novel: an epic form, a variety of personages, a ramified plot. The narration is limited to a few monologues by a main character and the “novel” consists of four characters’ lines of dialog (Ammū, Girl, Susan and Doctor) and short remarks by an author as narrator. The English translation of the novel is published in “The Little Magazine” as a “story”. Ai, larkī also was put on stage which confirms this novel’s dramatic form.

25 I am grateful for this information to Mariola Offredi.


27 Interview with K.B. Vaid in Delhi, 2007.

“biographical time” of the Mother) is much shorter than in Ajneya’s novel – just one or two days. But it is enough to show the entire picture of the relationship between mother and daughter, and to stress the main idea: “By giving birth to a daughter a mother will live forever … This is a source of creation (beṭī ke paidā hote hī mām sadājivī ho jātī hai. Vah kabhī nahīm marī ... vah śrṣṭī kā srot hai).” And earlier, at the very beginning of the novel, the same idea is expressed in a slightly different way: “Becoming a daughter you have become my mother and me….” (beṭī hokar tum merī māṃ banī ho ... aur main…). This clearly is a hint of an eternal circle of Life overcoming Death.

Sometime tensions arise between the heroines, but they do not lead to outbursts or cruelty. There are elements of alienation, but the reader feels them mainly in connection with male members of the family who never appear in Mother’s room and very rarely talk to her by phone. There is no need for Laṛkī (the “girl”) to complain or rebel. If she were to need something, then, considering her character, the reader could expect her to display ahimsā, in a very Indian, Hindu way. So the last sentences of the novel are: the girl assures her mother that everything will be fine (sab thik ho jāyega!) and then there is “deep-drawn sigh, a trembling and everything is peaceful in the room.”

Mother is shown as neither being afraid nor as expressing any special, specific reflections regarding the nature of God and Death. As was noted earlier, for Mother death is “a liberation of a body and a soul” (dehām kā nistārā) and life is līlā, divine Play. It is noteworthy that Ammī addresses to the doctors “my patient” (merī marīz) – because he cannot understand a reason of her illness. As for Ammū, she knows that some pretext for dehāmā kā nistārā – liberation of a body and a soul – is necessary, and that this is her illness.

Ammū knows some eternal truth with certainty, and only has to recollect her life, starting from early childhood up to the present. She just wants to pass on all her knowledge to the girl, her daughter. The author constantly stresses – with the help of her heroine – that she will live in future generations and there is no question of her being afraid. Selma also manages to retell her life story to Yoke, but this does not help the young woman to survive and overcome the temptation to make “her own choice” and die.

Laṛkī and Susan, as the reader can understand from the novel, are not married, so they cannot follow, at least at the moment, the motto of Ammī “Giving birth to a daughter a mother will live forever.” The main difference between the novels’ heroines is that Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s Ammū, Laṛkī and Susan do not actually feel this “strangeness” – neither towards the others, nor towards each other. Maybe, the woman- writer’s answer to Ajneya is this: first of all a person should love him/herself and those who are close to her. This will teach her how to love (not to choose for love and forgiveness) not only “a good man” (acchā ādmī) as Yoke-Mariam did, but any “stranger” who then will become not a stranger at all.

If this happens, the “empty sky” will become like the “Kingdom of the Lord.” If not, at least “everything will be peaceful in the room,” as in the finale of Ai, Laṛkī.

To my understanding, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī gives a message of “śānti.” And this is a reason why the novel by Kṛṣṇā Sobtī, written about 30 years later than Ajneya’s, might be viewed as a “stylistically alternative model” that tends to subvert the one by Ajneya. The interplay between the two texts is also very important for understanding the attitude of both writers to “ideology and cultural aesthetics” which changed with the passage of time. Working on my article, I proceeded from the assumption that the works of both writers combine a western and an Indian approach to understanding and representing the world. The passing of time shows that the so-called “Indian approach” becomes more universal while the “western” one is also changing.

Being brought up in the traditions of classical Russian literature, I would like to conclude my comparison of the two novels with a quotation from a poem by Pushkin:

“И долго буду тем любезен я народу,
что чувства добрые я лирой пробуждал»

“I will be loved by people for a long-long time, because by my lyre I have awakened good and kindly feelings”.

Both Indian writers follow this path; or in other words, God, or the purpose and meaning of Life and Death, is to be approached and found on the path of love. A more recent and in my opinion good example of this is the novel “Māī” by Gītāṃjali Śrī. Three generations of women are described in this text, in which the relations between a daughter, a mother, and a grandmother/mother-in-law continue to show the search for answers to eternal questions related to Life, Death, and God, answers that can be obtained on the path of Love. The novel itself also shows that a tradition continues, and that contemporary Hindi literature pays attention to and values what has been written and discussed in the second part of the twentieth century elsewhere in the world.

Literature


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