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**‘Modernity’ and Social Mores Delineation in Psychological Realism in
Indira Parthasarathy’s *Ashes and Wisdom***

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Indira Parthasarathy’s *Ashes and Wisdom* translated from the original Tamil novel *Vendhu Thanintha Kaadugal* by Padma Narayan and published in 2007 by India Writing is a very interesting piece of fiction delineating what many think of modernity and contemporary social mores with psychological realism. The original in Tamil was published in 1981. Modern living no longer believes in conforming to our traditional cultural mores and this leads to shocks, grief, discomfitures and catastrophes called ashes figuratively owing to lack of wisdom. Educated and affluent men and women think that making money and societal climbing are the only purposes and attractions too of living. This is the reason for lives getting reduced to ‘ashes’, minds and souls singed with the neglect of traditional mores recklessly pooh-poohing real wisdom.

The novel is a carefully sculpted narration with the personae tightly presented. There are just two couples Arun and Vimmi and Ramesh and Radhika with their son Rahul. Another character, Damodaran the successful painter too gets paid for his pride and pomposity. The first couple is shown as childless and only the woman has been taken for medical assessment and not the man. The man’s arrogance spells his ruin. The second pair - Ramesh and Radhika - has a school-going son who behaves oddly right from his school age. While it is the man in the first pair that goes totally wrong by his behaviour and temperament, it is the woman in the second pair – married at the age of eighteen - that ruins herself owing to her own faults. ‘Ashes’, anguish and shocks, are the consequence for the characters though they are not without awareness of the normal mores. The fifth major character Damodaran, three feet tall, hump backed, though a good and renowned painter, comes to an unhappy and tragic end because of his pontifications and pomposity. He attracts the attention of the impressed Vimmi who suddenly realizes that life is not merely attending with her hubby to parties as a beautiful, dutiful and charming wife with no ideas or tastes of her own.

Arun is self-satisfied that he has been climbing up in his official position earning profits for his company. He is proud of his wife’s beauty and faithfulness and takes pride in being a one woman man. He never gives any chance to his wife to speak up or asks for her opinion. For him she is a scintillating doll who helps him to go to higher positions, profit for his company and his own growth. Totally bored with attending parties along with her hubby she silently accept to stay docile and self-effacing listening to her husband’s proud talk. Radhika his assistant, number two in the office wants to learn about Vimmi but there is nothing that Arun reveals except his own greatness in having such a wife.

The novel starts with Vimmi's dreadful dream indirectly suggesting to her the inanity and insignificance of life.

Where is she? Is it a desert? There is sand, sand everywhere. Shouldn't there be pebbles? Did someone say he was picking up pebbles? ... My God! Here I am, doing the same work as they! Filling sacks with sand, loading them on to carts, unloading them, opening them and emptying them, over and over again; filling up, loading, unloading and emptying the sacks; filling, loading and emptying!^{1(p.7)}

The dream is a consequence of her feeling that first her mother refusing to accept that she could have emotions and an inner self and later her self-centered husband who does not treat her never asking her opinions on anything. Vimmi hates silently her husband's grandiose fancies. He does not see his inability to produce a child as a challenge. His talk is arrogant: "What if we don't have a child? We shall be youthful forever. I need never become a father or a grandfather, and our perennial youth will make it worthwhile."^{2(p.14)} High education, Westernization and affluence make people like Arun and Radhika violate, shed and even ridicule all social mores.

Radhika is Arun's next highest executive in a company dealing with Export and Import. She is never interested in anything like her husband's requirements or her son's studies and behaviour. She has a feeling of surprise about the relation between her boss and his wife Vimmi. Arun is an extrovert with nothing in his mind except pride for his beautiful wife and arrogance for his ability to go up on his job and making his company profitable using all clever means throwing up parties and maneuvering things. Radhika wonders if there is another Vimmi in her boss's wife Vimmi. Radhika is proud of her husband too. He is not even jealous of her mixing freely with other men. She never tries to find out if it is immense confidence in her or his sheer indifference that makes her husband Ramesh so impervious. She does not realize that her son's never speaking to her is because of her loveless ness in her pride of working with efficiency for Arun.

While Vimmi is a silent sufferer what with her self-effacement and stony silence, Radhika appears sensible in suggesting the possibility of another Vimmi in Vimmi. She asks Arun what he says he wants only profit and climbing up in his position: 'You regard your personal life, your marriage, as something sacred. When it comes to business you say only your success has relevance. Don't you see the contradiction?'^{3 (p.21)} and is explained 'My personal life concerns only me. But business is a social obligation. What is wrong in having separate measures to evaluate them?' She tells Arun openly that she does not see Vimmi as a simple, uncomplicated woman. By accepting our social norms, may be she identifies herself with you. But I do feel there is another Vimmi inside her.'^{4 (p.23)} In spite of this intelligence, Radhika does not know that she has been losing valuable things till she lost all, never to regain them.

Arun has his own concept of living successfully. He harangues his assistant Radhika once: 'Life is an **interesting proposition**. If we impose **unnecessary controls** ourselves and keep to the same **beaten track**, it could get tiresome. If there is always something to look forward to, if we could look out for **surprises of life**, nothing can be more interesting. That would mean living in real **freedom**. Do you think we can ever **tire** of it?' ^{5(p.23)} (Boldness added now) Varun thinks of nothing except being quite happy with his docile and self-effacing wife. Radhika's hubby never showed or expressed his objection to his wife's ways. That way pampered Radhika never thinks either of her hubby or her son. She enjoys her freedom. When Arun tells her pointblank that he is not interested to discuss his wife in the office the dialogue reveals the cracks beginning to show between them. Arun does not see any contradiction between his personal life and business. He tells her that his personal life concerns only him and that business is social obligation.

Damodran is seen by Vimmi in International Centre. A mere three feet tall, with a misshapen body, a huge hump on his back, piercing eyes, he is still esteemed by Vimmi for his brilliance in painting. She only hears him: 'If you had been an average woman, you would not have escaped from that crowd and come here. Boredom is indeed, a big problem. It was boredom that goaded Siddhartha to become Buddha. There are many ways to deal with boredom. You can write, paint, sing...' ^{6(p.31)} Vimmi only sits there; she does not see his form then, she only heard his voice and is totally transformed.

Radhika is in for a shock when her son Rahul tells her that he hates his father, Appa, a colourless person. He tells her that he has left home and that he is ashamed to call his father a coward. He tells her further 'You said he's my father, didn't you? He doubts it.' ^{7(p.41)} Arun too is shocked when he asks his wife what she thinks of Radhika, she smiles first and says that it is the first time he has sought his opinion. There goes on an altercation between husband and wife and Vimmi comes to the core of her heart and lambastes Arun: 'Radhika smokes, drinks and mixes with men without any inhibition. Your sensitivity, steeped in our tradition, does not accept this image. That is why you ask me sarcastically if I want to be like Radhika. You need Radhika to further your business interests. You do not have any qualms about using her. When it comes to your own wife, you expect her to be a personification of all virtues and a storehouse of your concept of our cultural values. I don't like your double standards.' ^{8.(pp. 48-49)} Vimmi tells her husband that she wants to be a different person and that he she has so far lived only to please him and Arun in a whiff tells her that from then on she may live for herself and that he does not stand in her way.

The wall between Vimmi and Arun, wife and husband goes on rising only after Vimmi sees and talks to the painter she got impressed with, Damodaran. After starting her heart's dear engagement in painting, Vimmi is ignited with further emotions and remembers Subrahmanya Bharati. She feels the urge to paint when frenzy began to possess her with the great poem:

A fledgling fire I saw

I put it in the hollow of a forest tree

The forest burst itself out – could

There be young or old in the fire's fury

Thatharikita Thatharikita Dhiththom...^{9(p.54)}

Then she goes to her room, brings out her brushes and paints, closing her eyes reciting the gloriously chilled words in the poem:

Transcending knowledge

Going beyond the five senses

Contemplating the vast expanse of the infinite void

Sans attachments of the mind and flesh

Devoid of feelings of pain and pleasure

Then and there in that state lies

The gresr moment of bliss

And bliss is liberation enow!'

We are told 'She experienced the ecstasy of reducing all the old garbage into ashes. She immersed herself into herself and drowned in an ocean of bliss.'^{10 (p.55)}

Vimmi tells Damodaran of her feeling a wave of ecstatic inspiration and asked about the cause replies that she remembered Bharati's verses. Replies Damodaran: 'Oh! That verse? Who can help being inspired by that poem? Bharati is a complete poet. Can anybody better this description of mystic experience? Mrs Arun, you should have come out only after finishing this painting. ... I doubt if you will be able to whip up the dame intensity of inspiration a second time and work on this picture.'^{11 (p.58)}

Vimmi realizes that when she was merely Arun's wife she led a vegetable life. She feels guilty for having wasted her life. She remembers what poet Bharati said: 'A worthy musical instrument thrown on to dust heap'. She discovers that only now she has discovered the limits of her freedom.

Arun feels distraught when their maid Poornima tells him when he called from Bombay that Vimmi has gone out. He talks to Radhika. She wonders if he has in his subconscious mind a crush on her in his subconscious mind and his doubt about Vimmi's transgression is a mere excuse. Varun's talk with Radhika about his wife is a sign of his weakness like cowardice. When she asks Varun if he knew anything about Vimmi's likes and dislikes he almost blurts: 'I am not all that bad to look at. My family background, my education, my official status, what was I lacking in? What more can a middle-class woman need?'^{12(p.74)} Radhika is right in her reply saying that perhaps it was that attitude of his that Vimmi did not like. Arun is stupid being so full of himself about thinking that he is great in winning the heart of his wife. His question about what more a middle-class woman would 'need' justifies the way he is treated by his wife - the moment a stranger could whip up her real thought and feeling. Vimmi thinks very highly of Damodaran and his words bring a lot of change in her. He says 'If we can live with perfect alignment of thought and deed that would be our *moksha*, the final frontier of living free. ... As long as an artist craves for approbation, we cannot say he lives in total freedom. Only when he remains anonymous after he had his say, would he be truly free. What do we know of the creators of our *Upanishads*? They were totally liberated.'^{13(p.79)}

Arun's altercation with his wife Vimmi becomes the last straw leading to the consequence of their separation. Agry with his wife after his call home is answered by the maid Arun begins the argument. 'It got quite late last night, I suppose.' (Arun begins) 'Yes, it was one o'clock when I came home' (Vimmi replies calmly.) 'Had an interesting time, I guess.' She did not reply. 'I should say I too had a terrific time in Bombay.' With those words, he gave her a searching look. She was not even looking at him. 'With Radhika.' (He says) Her face turned red with anger. 'Are you not ashamed to say it?' He came and stood by her. 'You spent your time until one o'clock last night with some bastard Damodaran. Aren't you ashamed of that? She was in great rage. She did not know how to reply him. She felt like beating him to a pulp, but if she did that, how would she be any different from him?'^{14(p.82)} She explains that she has gone to Damodaran's house to look at his paintings and even tells him that for the first time she has drunk whisky. 'What?' Arun stood up enraged. 'If this shocks you so much, how shocking your attending all these parties should have been to me!' (Vimmi shoots back.) 'What on earth would you call a misdeed? Going to the bastard's house was not wrong, drinking whisky there was not wrong, and who knows what happened there after that?' (Arun asks.) 'Get out,' Vimmi shouted, losing all control over herself. 'You took the words out of my mouth. I should have said that. I don't see any point now in both of us pretending to be husband and wife...' Arun stormed out of the room.^{15(pp85-86)}

Vimmi calls up Arun at his office but it is only Radhika who lifts us the phone. She is surprised since Arun's wife never calls his office to talk to him. Vimmi informs Radhika that she is leaving Arun's home. Arun and Radhika come back from the office to Arun's residence. Radhika tries to make him see reason with her remarks; 'Goodness! You married her and lived

with her all these years and you didn't know that she could paint?'^{16 (p.90)} She continues '... If you have to forego your freedom after marriage, then there is something wrong with the system. Vimmi must have felt she had surrendered her freedom. What a strain it must have been on her to live all these years, pretending that she liked all the things you did? When she reached saturation and pretence became impossible, she resorted to doing what she felt was right. I won't blame her.'^{17 (p. 91)} She gets angry when Arun asks her if freedom meant only sleeping with any male and asks him smiling 'Mr Arun, why didn't thought occur to you last night?'^{18(p. 91)} She finally explains to him telling him that a person's character is not decided only by sexual transgression and asking whether all that they do to rake in profits for their company is nor related to their standards of morality. The reader very clearly understands that Arun is only worried as to whether Vimmi is guilty of sexual transgression. He asks Poornima, the maid, as to how that painter looks and listening to what she says he goes to Damodaran's flat. He asks Vimmi if she is in love with that creature. For the second time she shouts as if possessed asking him to get out.

Six years elapse, Radhika staying with Arun and Vimmi staying with Damodaran with the permission of Damodaran's group. Living with Radhika, Arun still wants to get Vimmi back to him if he could and fails miserably. When Radhika realizes that she is not wanted by Arun while his being with his wife, she is wild with anger and she tells him that he is a coward.

There is a review of Damodaran's and there are Vimmi's painting in the newspaper. The review praises the painter and calls Damodaran a Socrates and a hard-core intellectual. After the party, Damodaran embraces her and she removes his hands from her. When he does not give a reply to his question if she does not like him, he tells her that sex is like hunger and thirst and that people should not give it false sanctity and become slaves of belief. Vimmi is not squeamish. She tells him that it is not true that she is does not have any hatred for his deformed figure and goes on explaining him her ideas at length. 'When I refused your advances the other day it was not because of your appearance. I told you even that I did not want our relationship to be corrupted. I have never been conscious of what you look like. All I see is your education, knowledge and ability to appreciate art. If you imagine it is something else and torment yourself with such thoughts, how can I be held responsible?'^{19 (p.128)} When he goes on drinking fast and heavily, she asks him: 'Do you want to prove that where basic instincts are concerned you are an average man?'^{20(p.128)} The painter, shocked and brought down several pegs, shouts asking her to shut up and go to sleep. That the smug and loquacious and cleverly pretentious painter is just a man of clay feet makes Vimmi only sad and disillusioned and this not the end of the story.

Radhika becomes a little penitent and wonders where her business acumen and ideas of freedom have taken her. A husband who has deserted her, her life with another man constantly suffering from feelings of guilt, a son who has no affection for his mother and daily bouts of whisky what has life come be! She is no position to ask Vimmi if she is happy. Things come to a crisis when the principal of Rahul's college sends for her and she has to go to be told that he has become a

drug addict and the college rules say that he cannot stay in the hostel. Her son himself is belligerent and only the principal is thoughtful in offering to keep the brilliant student with himself in his house. Totally crestfallen she returns advising her son not to succumb to his drug addiction only to be bludgeoned by him: 'Funny, you advising me! It only means that you are weakening.'^{21(p.136)}

Modern man (which of course includes a woman too) is left only flabbergasted with the way things happen. With gusto and in gumption freedom is believed to be fought for, asserted and enjoyed. But things go awry and lead to perplexity as happens in the case of Radhika who says: 'I don't understand any of it. Who can assign reasons for everything that happens? Why did Vimmi leave you? Why did Ramesh leave me? Why was Damodaran born disfigured? What brought Vimmi and Damodaran together? What is it that makes us both sit here now, drinking? Could we have avoided all these happenings? Whether it was fate or some other nonsense, are we not totally helpless?' Pouring out her anguish in an emotion-laden voice, she filled her glass for the third time with whisky.'^{22(p.139)}

Damodaran for all his self-esteem, smugness and self-possession seeks refuge in getting drunk to death. He gets totally deflated because of the simple traditional wisdom of his devout disciple. A man with feet of clay, disenchanted by his ardent worshipper Vimmi who says that he is no different from other males sends to him to an impotent rage and he leads him to finish himself off drinking a whole bottle of whisky. Radhika only asks Vimmi seeing the dead painter lying spread-eagled with head hanging down from the bed: 'You say he's an artist. Couldn't he find an aesthetic way of dying? What was his problem?' and asks her too as to what kind of relationship they had. She is told 'His problem was that there was no relationship.'^{23 (pp149-50)} Vimmi feels her head spin and her dream at the beginning of the novel recurs.

The basic ways of thinking of the modernized and consequently their behaviour in assessing social mores are convincingly presented in the novel. The earlier generations in the contemporary milieu used to have a certain adherence considered both necessary and useful as revealed in her father's thinking remembered by his daughter Radhika: 'Only a Hindu can have a particular life and be a different person in society, even when the two are quite opposed to each other. We can understand the paradox of a man, who, during British days, wore a suit to his office and then came home, wore a dhoti, wore sacred ash, and chanted *Gayatri mantra*. You can only understand that man if you look at him in the context of his social norms. To him there is no contradiction in his two images.'^{24(p.22)} Radhika knows what she is though it is proved to be not the right way as shown in her husband's deserting her and her son hating her with disgust. The novelist has made a valuable contribution to literature by making his readers understand the dangerous attitudes which harm and destroy happy and fruitful living.

Works cited

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