CHAPTER V

"QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL
FULFILMENT"
THE BLISS OF LIFE
The Bliss of Life is different from Rama Sarma's other novels in that here we have a treatment of history and myth. Although the narrative scaffolding is largely historical, the theme is the displacement of a myth or the rapturable union with the divine in the celebrated vaishnavite tradition. But Rama Sarma chooses the history of an individual to write a novel, because 'fiction seeks a broader and more enduring truth than history'.

And this has been the opinion of critics at least since Aristotle discovering the difference between historical truths and poetic truth, Aristotle observes,

The difference is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is considered more philosophical........ than history for whole poetry is considered with universal truths, history treats of particular facts.

Aristotle also considers works based on history in creative writing, since
even if he (the poet) writes about things that have actually happened, that does not make him any the less a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some of the things that have happened from being in accordance with the laws of possibility and probability, and he will be a poet in writing about them.³

It follows that “fiction allows the writer greater freedom to draw a moral to make judgements”.⁴

Even a casual reading of the novel seems to prove the assertion that

novelists seeking truth, even though they define it differently, often make special investigation in to social conditions or individual lives that border on scholarly research.⁵

Rama Sarma has “structured his imaginative insight in such a way that it serves both as a mirror and as a lamp. The novel succeeds not only in presenting a complex and at the same time, unified image of society, but also in throwing light on the Indian socio-cultural problematic”⁶. Moreover as Joan Rock Well has noted.
‘Fiction is not only a representation of social, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element in social change. It plays a large part in the socialization of infants, in the expression of official norms such as law and religion, in the conduct of politics, and in general gives symbols and modes of life to the population, particularly in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values and personal and interpersonal behaviour’.7

In many devotional works, the devotee always considers God the protagonist, the hero he loves. For example, Donne in one of his holy sonnets, ‘wants God to “ravish” him’.8

Crashaw begins his “Hymn to Sainte Teresa” as follows,

‘Love thou art absolute sole Lord of life and death’.9

The Bliss of Life is an imaginative reconstruction of the life history of Kshetrayya, a 17th century poet composed in Telugu and an ancestor of the novelist. Rama Sarma himself expresses.
I took it as an obligation on my part to sketch the life of Kshetrayya with involvement as he happened to be one of our ancestors. I thought I could give an authentic picture of his life and his achievements as a composer based on my knowledge of his life from our village elders and on the material given in his padams. But much of what I have said in the novel is imaginative.\textsuperscript{10}

Kshetrayya was earlier called Varadaiah, and he was a young devotee of Muvva Gopala. The first section of the novel very aptly opens with Varadaiah singing a song and Mohanangi dancing to that tune in ecstasy. To use the words of the novelist,

He enjoyed her company immensely. They had similar tastes, they both belonged to the world of music and dance. But gradually as they grew to be man and woman thoughts of love occupied their minds. Their study of Bharatha Natya Sastra and Bhanudatta’s Rasamanjari, gave them an intellectual refinement and affinity.\textsuperscript{11}

Their passionate association, emotional identification, and artistic tastes naturally lead to a deeper union. The novelist’s imaginative reconstruction of the scene is idyllic and impressive. Varada tells Mohana
"I am fond of you, desperately in need of you and your company. Without you there is no world for me. I cannot sing unless you dance. I can not compose songs unless I look at you and feel inspired". (P.No.5-6) Mohana responds warmly,

'Varada, I know your affection for me. I have also noticed the change in you recently. It is no longer that innocent look you have. Your looks communicate to me your desire to be with me, your passionate looking to take me into your hands, To take me all I am'. (P.No.6)

Varada enters a new phase of experience in life when he has a revelation on a Krishnashtami day. He is blessed by Muvva Gopala to be the great 'padam' composer to spread the message of love and devotion for God. After the revelation, mundane life appears dull and drab to him. He surrenders himself completely to God and starts composing padams in praise of him. During this phase we witness Kshetrayya's transformation form a sensuous attachment to life to a state of spiritual realization.

Kshetrayya recognizes his mission and gets a clear idea of his goal. At this stage he transcends his physical longings and reaches an emotional perception where he communes with the Lord and becomes a perfect instrument of the divine will by attaining total identification with the Lord,
Muvva Gopala. He does with joy, whatever the Lord prompts him to do. His compositions acquire a new melody, depth of meaning, passion, and metaphysical suggestiveness. He becomes fully conscious of the mission of his life, like any other devotee, and dedicates himself totally to the task of fulfilling that mission. He feels a kind of mystic elation in his communion with the divine, not without any a version towards Mohanangi. He tells her, in the typical tradition of Madhura Bhakthi.

From now on I am the consecrated bride of Muvva Gopala and He is my lover. I have to woo him, please him, praise him and worship him through devotional songs. I have to celebrate His glory through padams noted for their literary excellence, musical quality and dance potential. This is my cherished goal. (P.No.29)

All the passionate protestation of Mohanangi, that she is his beloved in all planes of her existence, physical, mental, and spiritual do not move Kshetrayya. He is so devoted to his task and absorbed in his mission that he feels a mystic elation and spiritual growth. His individual will is fully absorbed in the divine will he has surrendered himself to God.

'I have no will of my own. I surrendered myself to the will of God....... I have a noble and purposive life with a
mission. I have to fulfill that I also feel that sublimation of desires comes only through participation in pleasures. I do not believe in renunciation. Through a gradational process of willing and subordinating our physical pleasures to a higher pursuit we achieve the bliss of life, the communion with God and identification with the Lord". (P.No.30-31)

The first temptation comes from Kamala, a dancer in the court of the Golkonda Kings. She casts amorous glances at Varada. But Varada’s mind, ever since he has the revelation, is given to a nobler path and an ennobling desire to glorify Muvva Gopala, through his padams. This is his inner urge and the driving force in him. So when she proposes that he should stay with her in the court, he expresses his inability and explains to her about his ambition of spreading the message of Gopala. But still she urges,

But you can do that better by belonging to a court especially to a flourishing court. And this is the right place for you. I shall and, and I shall express the emotional content of your songs through dancing. We will make a good team and we will get name and fame. (P.No.36)
She tempts him not only with alluring promises of physical pleasures but also with the glory of fame, the natural weakness in great men. But Kshetrayya successfully overcomes this tempting offer by saying, “I am not anxious for name and fame for myself. It is for Muvva Gopala that I want all that glory, not for myself. I am his devotee and I am dedicated to his service”. (P.No.36) The words demonstrate his conviction and assert his faith in the life divine and all its bliss.

Rama Sarma being a Miltonic scholar feels that his hero should be tempted and tested. He says,

The bliss of Kshetrayya is tempted and tested before he is accepted by God. This is typically Miltonic. Much of the Miltonic thought content permeates my novel.\textsuperscript{12}

Here, the individual who is blessed through a revelation is presented in the process of becoming a greater being through a series of temptations. According to Narada Sutra. “A true devotee crosses Maya, the bondage to matter through sense attractions and selfishness. He should be free from the opposites”.\textsuperscript{13}
Rama Sarma maintain in his heroic argument, in a different context, "Blessed is the man who endures temptations, for when he is tried he receives the crown of life."14

Varada in his conversation with the King Vijaya Raghava says,

God may choose to expose his devotee to a fiery test before He accepts him. The path of celestial glory is a difficult one. So God purposely puts man in the midst of temptations so that he may be tempted and tested and those who go through this process successfully become identified with God. (P. No.55)

After visiting Tirumala Nayaka's court in Madhurai he proceeds to Kanchi, where he has a mystic experience which confirms his belief that he is the blessed one. One night Varada is left in the temple of Kanchi Varadaraja unnoticed. The next morning when he wakes up from his meditation he sees the goddess leaving the Lord's temple and he composes a padam being thrilled by that vision of the goddess. The priests admire his devotion and adore him as a saint.

He stays at Kanchi for a month and later leaves for Tanjavur, where he happens to face another temptation, this time from Kalyani, a dancer in
the court of Vijaya Raghava. She expresses great infatuation for him by offering herself to him. But he says, “I am wedded to Muvva. All my feelings and emotions, all my perceptions and capabilities are given to him”.(P.No.65)

Kshetrayya faces the final and crucial test in the court of the Nawab of Golconda. Kshetrayya is asked to write fifteen hundred padams in forty days. This serves as a challenge to test his super human poetic powers. He accepts it as a means to glorify Muvva Gopala. Kamala, who was once rejected by Kshetrayya, conspires against him by joining hands with Tirumala Murthy, the court poet of the Nawab. She invites Kshetrayya to her house and he accepts the invitation because he has attained a stage of spiritual evolution where he is disposed to regard all with equal love. He accepts the hospitality of Kamala and she gives him a love potion, a practice which was common in medieval India to make the unyielding yield to love. Mohana devoted to Kshetrayya as deeply as Kshetrayya is devoted to Gopala, suspects some foul play against Kshetrayya. She approaches Siddendra Yogi who happens to be at Golconda and with his help Kshetrayya comes out of the evil effect of the potion just a day before the stipulated time given by Kutub Shah to compose fifteen hundred padams. He enters a deep trance of absolute communion with the divine and all the fifteen hundred padams are composed on time. The test demonstrates that Kshetrayya has divine grace and he is blessed by the Lord. The intrigues of
Kamala and Tulasi Murthy prove ineffective and Kshetrayya ultimately triumphs and his poetic genius is established beyond dispute. During this time of trial, Kshetrayya hears a divine voice, ‘Varada, very soon you will be with me. Visit the other holy places and come back to Muvva to be identified with me’. (P.No.134). Blessed by Gopala he visits other holy places like Bhadrachalam, Srisailam, and Tirumala. After completing this pilgrimage he intuitively feels as though Muvva Gopala is calling him back. He decides to return to Muvva.

Though Mohanangi fails in her quest to meet Kshetrayya at Kanchi finally she meets him at the court of Vijaya Raghava in Tanjavur. She stays with him, but now, her former lover, Varadaiah is totally a transformed man. No doubt, he still returns love for her, but it is of a different kind, it is part of his love and devotion to Lord Gopala. When Mohana reminds him of their youthful life in Muvva, he tells her “Mohana, we may again sit by the side of the tank, but our minds will be given only to an appreciation of God’s ways and to an awareness of objects we see as manifestation of divine beauty and grace.” (P.No.143-144)

Finally Kshetrayya returns to Muvva with Mohanangi. He waits for the sacred moment to become one with Gopala. He is acclaimed by every one as the chosen and blessed one. There is the final consummation when the illustrious padam writer starts singing his padams with divine rapture in
Muvva Gopala’s temple accompanied by the spirited dance of Mohanangi on the Krishnastami day. It is a fitting finale. He has that deep experience of being one with the divine. The individual life of Kshetrayya merges with the divine, symbolically, as a small flame merges with the luminous glow of the divine. As the novelist says, ‘Mohana sees God in Varada as Varada sees god in Gopala. He for God only, she for God in him’.15

Kshetrayya becomes a ‘Jivanmuktha’ whose sense of ‘mine’ has vanished, who is unmoved at the sight of fair damsel....... He feels no dislike for the world. He is free from joy and sorrow’.16

The Kathopanishad expounds the same truth, that the senses are to be controlled and if one is always of unrestrained mind and devoid of right understanding, his senses become uncontrollable and one who has a controlled mind reaches the goal. Kshetrayya’s goal is to sublimate his desires. He has to attain wisdom and establish his right relationship with the God and become identified with Muvva Gopala.

Thus he successfully steers himself clear of this temptation. Like the sublime individual, he transcends the limitations of the self, of passion and of sublunary desires; he understands the hollowness of the worldly glory which is an insubstantial airy nothing. He acquires a sort of detachment from honours and rewards and all others material gains. In Upanishadic

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terms, "he is a 'Jnani' who gets anything he takes through the power of his 'Sat Sankalpa'. A jnani wills and everything comes into being".  

Kshetrayya reaches a stage where he says that all the glory that comes to him belongs to Muvva Gopala. And at that juncture the King, Vijaya Raghava declares,

'you are a Kshetrayya. You have attained the turn total of wisdom. You have established the right relationship with God. You are one of the blessed few, knowing everything, seeing everything perfectly. You have the bliss of life, the heavenly joy, the spiritual enlightenment to hereby you have annihilated the lower self in you. You have attained divinity'. (P.No.127)

Thus in The Bliss of Life, Rama Sarma has successfully reconstructed this progression and liberation of the life of Kshetrayya from an earthly to a spiritual plane. As Rama Sarma explains,

'the bliss of Life for Mohanangi is romantic life with Varada. It is romantic idealization of love; The bliss that Kalyani and Kamala visualize simply refers to physical pleasures. To Kshetrayya the bliss would mean identification with the Lord, Muvva Gopala'. (P.No.127)
In the portrayal of the evolution of Kshetrayya, the author has rightly laid more emphasis on the depiction of the theme of divine love by showing the hero in the actual process of composing the padams. The author provides a convincing locale and topography for Kshetrayya’s journey through the various stages of his career as a devotional composer and the progress of his career from a stage of passionate love to that of devotional love, ultimately leading to the divine lover, the bliss of life.

Rama Sarma employs myth in every one of his novels,

A myth necessarily deals with an idealized man or a man larger than life and Professor Rama Sarma employs the device of mythicizing facts in order to give his hero an exalted status and the story a universal significance.\(^\text{18}\)

As Nageswara Rao explains,

This is a tradition beginning with the Rishis of Vedas \(\ldots\) The same tradition has been continued by the medieval mystics, the song composers like Chaitanya and a number of others.\(^\text{19}\)
He further explains,

the social disapproval of the love of Kshetrayya and Mohanangi which actually intensifies their love on the one hand and the love of the couple to the Lord Gopalam on the other. They feel isolated and therefore divine more to the side of God and become more devoted. The effect of this social segregation is more pronounced on Kshetrayya than on Mohanangi.  

It is further said that,

The fundamental quest of Indian life, art, literature and music is to attain the joy of spiritual realization, the rapture divine. This is a tradition beginning with the Rishis of the Vedas who composed the melodious hymns, the Upanishadic sages who composed the deep philosophical and poetic passages of the Upanishads. But Kshetrayya's padams have a vital difference. He composed padams, which have literary as well as musical value. More than this, the padams are chiefly intended for dance, dance of the tradition popularly known as Kuchpudi dance. Scholars claim that this is in
the direct tradition of Bharata stands for the union of Bhava, Raga and Tala. This is the ideal combination of literature, music and dance. Kshetrayya composed such padams. 

Kshetrayya proves by demonstration that an artist is not bound by the rigid classifications and theories of the sastras. He silences the court poets by showing their limitations by giving them a problem which they cannot complete but which he completes fulfilling the technical requirements of literacy, art and music and dance the pandits themselves speak of.

Not only as adolescent lovers but even as mature adults Kshetrayya and Mohana prove to have been made for each other. Consequently no caste or colour or creed barrier separate them. Their present devotion for each other is born not out of physical affinity but out of reason and self-control, which they acquire in the process of their spiritual enlightenment. As Hari Babu observes,

both of them lead a total dedication of life to their Gods. Varada and Mohana in this selection of their respective Lords of surrender, have attuned their individual wills to the will of their Lords. The spiritual union is born out of
their total identification of their surrender to experience
the divine essence of love.\textsuperscript{22}

He admits that the glories of the past exist no more for them, but
substituted by mellowed glories now, which are the real glories one shall
cherish. Hence

The trials and troubles physical, intellectual and spiritual,
through which Kshetrayya passed, make him a sage. He
transcends the limitations of human desires. He acquires
a humility, which is endless.\textsuperscript{23}

Kshetrayya becomes stoical. He becomes a Karma Yogi in the real
sense of the term. It is not in itself a state of renunciation. It is realization.
Realization as a means to achieve something beyond salvation.

Kshetrayya finally gets 'Mukti'. This is not the salvation
as described by the modern Indian philosophers which is
often called Moksha. Moksha is simply salvation. It is
not liberation in this life. This liberation is called Mukti
in the Upanishads. Mukti as shown in \textit{The Bliss of Life}
is the attainment of Ananda, here and now. There can be
bliss in this life only'.\textsuperscript{24}
This is what our saints and sages like the Budha or Adisankaracharya
or our bards like Thyagaraja, Purandhara Das, Annamacharya aspired for.
It is an aspiration beyond the place. Syed Mukaram also conveys the same idea.

Prof. Rama Sarma successfully has reconstructed this progress and liberation of the life of Kshetrayya with remarkable art in his novel, The Bliss of Life. It is quite in the fitness of things that instead of making the novel a concealed biography of Kshetrayya, the author has made it a picture of the bliss of life divine. The title The Bliss of Life therefore, is artistically and aesthetically apt. In the portrayal of the evolution of Kshetrayya, the author has rightly laid more emphasis on the depiction of the theme of divine love by showing the hero in the actual process of composing of the padams. The author provides a convincing locale and topography of Kshetrayya’s journey in the various stages of his career as a devotional composer, and the progress of his character from a life of passionate love to that of devotional love ultimately leading to the bliss of life'.25
Regarding the structure of the novel,

Rama Sarma succeeds in portraying this gradational change in Varadaiah towards perfection. The plot is well organized and the style is mellow, lucid and rich. It shows Prof. Rama Sarma at his best'.

In accordance with what Lord Krishna says to Arjuna in The Bhagavad Gita,

Your duty lies in doing Karma, never a right to the fruits. Let not thee fruit of action be the motive nor there be any attachment to non-action.

Varada exemplifies ‘Nishkama Karma’, and reminds us of what Lord Krishna in the Gita says,

‘he excels ..... who restraining the senses by the mind, unattached, directs his organs of action to the path of work’.

Varada gains the blessed state of union with God through the path of supreme devotion which transports the devotee beyond human, earthly love.
What he strives after with Mohana as a twin partner, is renunciation of material aspiration and recognition of God not as the sole refuge but as a twin with God in a supreme state of bliss where love not merely ennobles and entralls the human being but transports him into the world of the Divine.

About his divine mission Varada says, “from time to time God sends his saints and sages into this world so that they remind human beings of the ultimate reality and of the futility of earthly longings.” (P.No.106) These words reveal Varada’s conviction about the subtle points of intersection between time and eternity which lead to an ennobling of human endeavour, and man’s renunciation of the physical and the acceptance of the spiritual intimations for a holistic order to prevail in the universe. The esoteric quest for spiritual fulfillment for the integration of man and society passes far beyond the Maslowian version of the ideal social order, Eupsychia.
REFERENCES


3. Ibid., p.44.


5. Ibid., p.163.


10.“Interview with M.V. Rama Sarma”, 10th October, 2000 by the Research Scholar.


24. loc. cit.


