

Aparajito

Story *Aparajito* (1956, *The Unvanquished*) is the sequel to *Pather Panchali*, the better-known novel by the Bengali writer Bandopadhyay. It picks up the story of Apu when he is a teenager on the brink of adulthood. The family has settled in Benares, where the father is beginning to make a livelihood as a priest but then suddenly dies. With help from an uncle, Apu and his mother move back to rural Bengal, where Apu trains to be a priest but longs to go to school. Eventually, his mother allows him to study and he impresses a local visiting dignitary, who then helps him get admitted to Calcutta University. Again, his mother tries to persuade him to stay but later agrees to let him leave her. Apu works at a printing press in order to survive while at university, and he goes back to see his mother only infrequently. Not wishing to disturb his studies, she does not tell him that she is seriously ill. When he learns of her condition, he goes back and finds her already dead. His uncle suggests that he remain in the village and work as a priest, but Apu rejects this idea and returns to Calcutta. In the big city, he lives a hand-to-mouth existence and struggles to maintain his self-respect.

Later, and unexpectedly, Apu marries. He is a guest at another man's wedding in a wealthy family. Just before the ceremony, the bride's mother cancels the wedding because she discovers that the groom is mentally ill. In this crisis (the bride would become virtually unmarriageable), Apu agrees to step in and become the groom. From this rather unusual wedding, which exaggerates the fact that traditionally husbands and wives do not know each other before marrying, the couple learn to love each other. Tragedy strikes again, however, when his wife dies in childbirth. Now, Apu the dreamer has the responsibility of raising a child. He wanders, he takes small jobs, he loses money through his generosity and he suffers, but eventually he ends up back in the countryside, where he finds serenity and happiness with his son. He is indeed 'unvanquished.'

Characters

Apu Apu is the central character. As in the earlier novel (*Pather Panchali*), he is sympathetic, a dreamer and an idealist. In this book, however, we see that he grows more and more distant from his mother, who is ill in their village. He has turned his affection to his wife.

Sarbajaya Sarbayaya, Apu's mother, is the epitome of the self-sacrificing mother. She is widowed and Apu is her only joy in life, but she agrees to let him leave her to study at the university. Even when she is dying, she decides not to summon him, lest his studies are disturbed.

Aparna Aparna is Apu's young wife, who also comes from a village and appreciates her husband's mentality. Although she has never suffered the poverty of Apu's life, she is loving and gentle in their straightened circumstances. Living in a dingy two-room apartment in Calcutta, she creates solace for Apu by hanging bright curtains over the windows and keeping the sheets and pillow covers sparkling white.

Themes

Self-fulfilment Apu cannot realise his dreams in the village and goes to the university in Calcutta to enter a world where the mind is valued. Leaving the village also means leaving his mother, which is another step in his self-realisation. This process is completed when he marries and finds a new life in loving his wife. And yet, after his wife dies in childbirth, and after he suffers physically and psychologically, Apu finds happiness only when he returns to the countryside and brings up his son.

Maternal love As in the previous novel about Apu (*Pather Panchali*), his mother sacrifices herself for her son's welfare. Although she is widowed and all alone (except for an ineffectual uncle), the mother agrees to let Apu leave her and go study at the university in Calcutta. Similarly, rather than cause him worry that might distract him from studying, she does not send him word that she is very ill.

Urban versus rural Tension between the joy of the countryside and the economic necessity of the city runs through this novel. Apu works as a clerk in a claustrophobic office, with no natural light and cramped quarters. He rents a small room nearby to which he is forced to bring his young wife because he cannot afford to give her money to live in the village. The author explains it this way: 'Being alone in these isolated places brought a change in his own state of mind. In the city, one's mind might be wholly preoccupied with thoughts of self, desire or ambition. Here, under the colossal expanse of the star-studded sky, these things seemed both irrelevant and insignificant. The mind could expand here; learn to be more generous, tolerant and observant. One's whole angle of vision could change.'