

UNVANQUISHED

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

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 have 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.'

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.'

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

Sarbayaya 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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

APU

Character In this sequel to *Pather Panchali*, Apu, the young boy becomes a man, albeit troubled by conflicting loyalties. Apu begins to mature when he decides to leave his village home and his widowed mother to study at the university in the city. Slowly he withdraws himself from his childhood memories of the countryside and his family. He works in a printing shop to pay the university fees but is too proud to admit this to his university friends. He appears almost indifferent to his mother's lonely and vulnerable position as a widow in their village; he visits her but more out of duty than affection. When she dies, during one of his absences, he feels a mixture of relief and grief. He is free but he has lost his mother. Apu remains a dreamer, hoping to become a writer and caring little about his lack of money; but, at the same time, he does make himself accept work that will bring in the minimum cash necessary to survive. Later, after marrying almost as a whim (see below), he learns to love his upper-class wife, although he had not known her before the wedding. His conflicted nature is displayed later, after his wife's early death, he is paralysed with grief but is unable to accept the responsibility of bringing up their son. At the end, he does finally embrace his role as a father, and yet he does not give up his carefree attitude and takes to the road with his son on his shoulders.

Activities

Much of Apu's time is spent studying in school and at university. He also works in a printing shop and, after university, takes on a number of low-paid jobs. During these days of near-poverty in the city, he dedicates himself to becoming a writer. After his marriage, he spends even more time working at unrewarding jobs, while still finding time to read in the evening. When his wife dies, he takes to wandering the countryside and doing manual labour.

Illustrative moments

Irresponsible Although Apu has matured, by breaking the deep bond with his village and his mother, he remains incapable, or least unwilling, of accepting adult responsibilities. This is dramatically revealed when, following the death of his wife in childbirth, Apu rejects his role as a father and leaves Calcutta to wander and work as a manual labourer.

Kind Apu's strange wedding displays his essential kindness, even if it is hard to separate from his nonchalance. Apu is a guest at another man's wedding when the mother of the bride declares that she is breaking off the arrangement because it has been revealed that the groom is mentally ill. In this crisis (the bride will be tarnished forever almost as a divorcée used to be in some western countries), Apu agrees to step in and become the groom.

Matured The transformation of Apu's character, from dreamy child nestled in the uncomplicated world of his mother's love in a village, is dramatized by his growing emotional and geographical distance from his mother. When he returns to the village one day, from his life as a university student in the city, he falls asleep as she tries to tell him about her worries, left alone in the village, and what will happen if she falls ill.

Impetuous Despite, or perhaps because of, his withdrawal from his mother, Apu is loving husband. In a highly charged scene, Apu is reading a letter from his wife (in their village) while returning from

work, only to find her brother waiting for him with news of her death. Shocked, shattered and enraged, the normally passive Apu punches the brother, as the bearer of such news.

SARBAJAYA (Suffering)

Character Sarbajaya is a character of deep suffering and the epitome of parental sacrifice. After her husband dies of an illness, and she has no other means to support herself and her son, Apu, she takes up a humiliating job as a cook in a rich man's house. This is difficult for a woman who has all her life been a domestic person, shy and unused to strangers. Later, an uncle takes her back to his ancestral village. There, however, she becomes lonely when she agrees to let Apu leave here and study in Calcutta. Although she does not want him to go, she manages to put his future ahead of her present. Once he leaves her, she begins to develop illnesses and revives only on the few occasions that he visits her. She is caught in a dilemma: she needs him but she also wants him to succeed. Those two desires are brought into horrible conflict when she knows that she is dying and yet decides that she will not ask him to come because that might disrupt his education. There can be no more dramatic portrayal of the hard truth that children need to separate from their parents in order to flourish as individuals.

Activities Sarbajaya spends her days in domestic work and ritual ceremonies, whether in the city (in the beginning of the book) or in a village (at the end). She cooks, she sweeps, she goes to the temple and she prays. She makes friends, but she doesn't gossip with women in the village or city. She is illiterate, but she can read the ritual Hindu calendar which she consults every morning and evening.

Illustrative moments

Alone Sarbajaya is a lonely woman. She loses her husband through illness, and later her son (Apu) abandons her in a village in order to pursue his life in Calcutta. A poignant scene that illustrates her predicament occurs on one of Apu's infrequent and dutiful visits to the village. Mother and son are sitting inside a modest village house, the son having eaten his mother's cooking and she only eating the leftovers. Then she begins to talk to him, in the dim light of a fire, telling him how much she wants to come to Calcutta to see him and perhaps stay with him. As we read her words, we know how unrealistic her wish is: as a struggling student, Apu has nowhere to keep her and no money to feed her. She keeps talking as she tidies up after their meal, with her back to him. And when she turns around, to ask him when she can visit him, she sees that he is asleep. In fact, he has been asleep the whole time. Sarbajaya is kept alive, it seems, only by looking forward to her son coming to see her and by her dream of visiting him. But in this scene the awful truth is conveyed to her that he is (literally) not listening to her. Indeed, it is Apu's coldness toward his mother that is the most controversial aspect of this best-loved of Bengali novels.

Vulnerable As a woman, and especially as a widow, Sarbajaya has almost no status in traditional Hindu society. She has no means to support herself and her son; she is entirely dependent on male relatives, who might take advantage of her. Her vulnerability is illustrated in one scene when the family is still living in the village. With her husband ill (and about to die), a neighbour, Nanda Babu, appears in the doorway of the small house. Sarbajaya is all by herself (Apu, her son, is at school). Nanda Babu says he's come to help, but the novelist's description of him suggests otherwise. 'He grinned with pleasure, and his new shoes shone in the sunlit doorframe.' He enters the house, and Sarbajaya, alerted to something in his demeanour, retreats into the kitchen. He follows and begins to speak in thinly-veiled erotic terms. Now, he is only a few feet away and coming closer, but Sarbajaya is prepared. She has grabbed a long knife, which she holds out in front of her. We doubt that she would ever use it, and the neighbour decides not to find out and leaves. Shaking with fear, Sarbajaya then drops the knife and collapses on the kitchen floor.

APARNA (Resourceful)

Character In this sequel to *Pather Panchali*, Aparna is Apu's wife, although that statement isn't even half the strange truth of their marriage. Aparna was about to marry another man, when, at the very last moment, as the wedding ceremony was about to begin, it becomes obvious that the bridegroom is mentally disabled. Aparna's parents cancel the wedding but then realise that (according to traditional belief in astrology) if she is not married on that specific, auspicious day, she can never marry. Apu, a guest at the wedding, steps up and marries her. She comes from a wealthy family and he is a struggling student, but they come to love each other. She is the epitome of innocence (she is married at 14 or 15), but also intelligent and poised. Aparna quickly adjusts to the near-poverty

conditions in which her husband lives, accepts his impractical decisions and forgives his indiscretions. She is not only beautiful but an organised and efficient housekeeper. Their happy life gets happier when she is pregnant, but then she dies in childbirth and Apu is thrown into a depression from which he never fully recovers.

Activities Aparna is kept busy transforming Apu's dingy apartment into a bright and cheery place. She is also occupied by the English lessons that Apu gives her every morning. Her domestic life is enlivened by a series of little pranks that she and Apu play on each other, almost like two children in a playground. One morning, she wakes up to find that an end of her sari is tied to Apu's pyjama bottoms and that he pretends to be asleep. On another day, Aparna slips a little note into her husband's pipe, reminding him that he has promised to smoke only once a day.

Illustrative moments

Resourceful Aparna's practical and resourceful nature is illustrated in the scene when she first sees Apu's two-room apartment, where he has brought her as a new bride. Squalid would not be an exaggeration. There are stained walls, chipped furniture, a primitive kitchen and an unclean bathroom. Aparna takes it all in with a few quick glances and then walks to the only window and looks at the view through a hole in the dirty curtain. Then she turns around with a big smile and says, 'It's our home and I will make it a good home.' True to her promise, she sets about remaking the apartment by cleaning everything from top to bottom, hanging colourful curtains and using ironed bed linen that sparkles. And all this is achieved with the very meagre money that Apu receives from his tutoring. And it is all the more remarkable because Aparna had, until this time, lived in luxury with servants. Amid the urban filth, the resourcefulness of the young bride is a delight.

Courageous Aparna has already shown that she has strength, especially for a teenager, in accepting the unusual events of her marriage and in adapting so quickly to the unfamiliar poverty of her new husband. However, an even more dramatic illustration of her courage occurs much later when she is pregnant and goes back to her family's house for the 'lying-in' period. She is in a train, and Apu, her husband, is standing on the platform, talking to her through the open window. She will be gone for two long months, and in her heart of hearts she knows that something will go wrong. She fears that she will miscarry or that there will be a stillbirth, or that in two months her husband will forget her or that he will get seriously ill. All these thoughts race through her mind as she tries to compose her face and smile sweetly at him. 'Yes,' she says, 'I'll be all right. Yes, the baby will be fine. Yes, I'll come back as soon as I can.' All these hard-won assurances suggest to the reader that something will indeed go wrong. And when we reread that scene, after already knowing that Aparna will die in childbirth, it is nothing less than heartbreaking.