

## Ra.Vi.Sastri's 'A Man of No Consequence' (alpajIvi)

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### Inferiority, Individual Psychology and Cultural Determinism: An 'Indian Complex' in Ra.Vi.Sastri's A Man of No Consequence



*Alpajeevi [A Man of No Consequence] is based on Adler's theory of Inferiority Complex. According to this theory inferiority complex sets in during one's childhood itself, and after coming of age it leads to abnormal behaviour. Adler theorized that the influence of the environment, especially one's family environment during the childhood years, plays a crucial role in moulding human behaviour. He suggested that in course of one's later life if a traumatic event takes place, it brings back to memory the childhood experience and enables one to fight inferiority complex by bringing about a clear understanding. The insignificant man of this novel, Subbaiah, has been created following the principle of inferiority complex. His getting caught in a difficult situation, his extricating himself from it, and his gaining a hitherto unexperienced self-confidence—these in short form the crux of the story. — R.S. Sudarshanam*

[1]

*I wanted to reserve some sympathy for the clerk [the protagonist] when I started writing the novel. But by the time I reached its end I lost much of my sympathy for him. I don't know why it happened like that. ... I was surprised when Bharati came forward to serialize the novel. I was ashamed of and irritated with the idea of the novel appearing under my own name, and not pseudonymously. I don't use a pseudonym any more. The shame too is gone. But the irritation remained. — Ra.Vi.Sastri [2]*

Rachakonda Viswanatha Sastri, better known to the Telugu literary world as Ra.Vi.Sastri, started his literary career early in life, by publishing short stories during his college days. He has to his credit more than sixty short stories of extraordinary literary merit. Alpajeevi (or A Man of No Consequence in English translation) was one of his very few completed novels. It was serialized in the literary periodical Bharati from January 1953 to April 1953. Bharati was a prestigious journal of that era and writers often established their reputation by publishing short stories/novels in it. Thus with the publication of Alpajeevi in Bharati Ra.Vi.Sastri arrived on the main stage of Telugu literature and remained there till his death in 1993. Alpajeevi, together with Buchibabu's Chivaraku Migiledi (That Which Remains at the End), heralded modernism in Telugu fiction by lending it a new psychological depth. Prior to their publication Telugu novels tended to be patently romantic in orientation and thus hardly served the purpose of truth—psychological or social.

The protagonist of A Man of No Consequence has been diagnosed by critics as suffering from Inferiority Complex. It might help to clearly understand here what 'inferiority complex' primarily signifies. The term was originated by Alfred Adler, the onetime disciple of Sigmund Freud and the founder of Individual Psychology. He explains in an oft-quoted passage: "The feeling of inferiority rules the mental life and can be clearly recognized in the sense of incompleteness and un-fulfillment, and in the uninterrupted struggle both of individuals and humanity."<sup>[3]</sup> Merriam-

Webster's Online Dictionary simplifies it and defines inferiority complex as "an acute sense of personal inferiority often resulting either in timidity or through overcompensation in exaggerated aggressiveness." It is clear from these definitions that inferiority complex is basically the feeling on the part of an individual that he is inferior to others in some way. This feeling could be a result of a real inferiority in the person, such as the one stemming from an organic deformity, but most often it is purely imaginary. This feeling lies in the unconscious and directs the course of the individual's behaviour. Inferiority feeling could sometimes motivate one to achieve spectacular success but when it acts as a disincentive, one would feel greatly discouraged and retreat from the difficulties and challenges posed by life. Adler proposes two types of inferiority feeling—'primary' and 'secondary.' 'Primary' inferiority feeling is that

which emanates from a child's original experience of helplessness and dependence on the adults around him. 'Secondary' inferiority feeling has to do with an adult's inability to reach his 'fictional final goal' or achieve the unrealistic subjective security. The actual or perceived distance from this exalted ideal would precipitate the original inferiority feeling. The subject then experiences a complex of these feelings as debilitating. The unconscious goal one sets to fight off the primary feeling of inferiority thus paradoxically leads to the secondary feeling of inferiority.

Subbaiah is an inferiorized and marginalized individual. His suffering has been realistically, yet artistically, portrayed in *A Man of No Consequence*. The beginning of the novel itself—the very first passage—sets the tone:

“Subbaiah is not good-looking.”

That is Subbaiah's opinion.

“Subbaiah is just plain no good.”

That too is Subbaiah's opinion.

....

“Father is scared of mother.”

This is what his son Krishnuudu has discovered.

“Subbaiah is very inefficient.”

This is the remark the head clerk in his office passes.

“Subbaiah is too timid.”

This is what many people say.[4]

This beginning unmistakably establishes the severity of the inferiority complex in the protagonist. His inferiority complex is however not the same as propounded by Adler. Society as a whole, and his own wife as well, regard Subbaiah as a feckless fellow. But in reality he is a law-abiding and god-fearing man, even if unabashedly pusillanimous. He works as a clerk in a government office. He is afraid of everything and everybody around him—his wife Savitri, his brother-in-law Venkat Rao, and even his colleagues at the office. He is afraid of even himself and is greatly surprised when he inadvertently makes (what to him looks like) a bold statement. Being such a timid man, he is not efficient as an office worker. He is very slow in disposing of the files entrusted to him. For this reason he is transferred finally to the Despatch Section which is considered to be a fit place for incompetent clerks like him.

Early enough in the novel, Ra.Vi.Sastri tells us about a couple of traumatic experiences that Subbaiah had gone through during his childhood. [1] Subbaiah's mother passed away when he was a mere toddler. His father married again five years later. His stepmother was an uncouth woman and she used to beat him everyday. Luckily for Subbaiah this woman eloped with a neighbourhood gentleman within a year. [2] When Subbaiah was ten years old his father was attacked and savagely beaten by two unknown assailants. It has been suggested that these two incidents—the cruelty of his stepmother and the physical assault on his beloved father—are responsible for the sprouting and persistence of inferiority complex in Subbaiah. But there could be a host of other reasons as well. One of them seems to be the unequal power relations obtaining within the families of coastal Andhra Pradesh. In this region of Andhra Pradesh, possibly because of excessive feminization of society, especially among certain upper castes, women tend to be in command of family affairs, while men often play a subordinate role. Some of the important fictional works of the era, the ones that sought to depict social reality frankly and honestly and not advocate the so-called 'women are the victims' theory for the sake of being politically correct, bear out this truth beyond doubt. The women of these novels, who clearly lack in social concern and are openly money minded on top of it, often compel their men to

sacrifice their individuality and that way prevent them from realising their potential as human beings and from fulfilling their social and moral obligations. In G.V. Krishna Rao's Keelu Bommalu (Puppets), for example, the wealthy and well-respected village landlord Pullayya suffers a moral downfall unable to contend with his

cantankerous wife Lakshamma. Full twenty years later the situation did not change for the better for men. Thus in Vasireddy Sitadevi's Matti Manishi (The Man of Soil) the manipulative and ambitious heroine, Varudhini, makes a virtual slave of her husband Venkatapathy by putting her considerable physical charms to good use, and renders her father-in-law Ooraboyina Sambaiah a pauper by appropriating his money and then investing it on highly risky

ventures. She does not even hesitate to confer sexual favours on other men in the hope of furthering her business interests. In A Man of No Consequence too, like almost every other woman character, Subbaiah's wife Savitri is of extremely malevolent disposition. She is given to habitually belittling him by dealing countless subtle insults for not being what she expected him to be. Subbaiah has learnt to accept without protest her constant and contemptuous dismissal of him as a man utterly unworthy of her love, and to automatically treat himself as inferior to her. Thus his powerlessness at home, traceable to cultural roots, too seems to contribute in no small measure to his inferiority complex.

Because of a disagreement over sharing bribe money between two senior clerks in the office, Subbaiah is transferred from the Despatch Section to the all-important Bills Section. Passing bills filed by the contractors is now the responsibility of Subbaiah. Any other clerk managing this section stands the possibility of making huge sums of money by accepting bribes from the contractors. But, being scared of the law, and indeed almost everything under the sun, Subbaiah cannot even visualize the possibility.

Savitri and her brother Venkat Rao are confirmed in their opinion that Subbaiah is 'irredeemable' and between the two of them they trivialize him to such an extent that, except as the wage-earner, his existence has no meaning for them. But when Venkat Rao comes to know that his brother-in-law is now the clerk-in-charge of the Bills Section, he persuades Subbaiah, pleading an urgent need for money, to accept a bribe of five hundred rupees from a contractor called Gavaraiah (incidentally, five hundred rupees was considered a large sum of money during the 1950s). The moment he has accepted the bribe money from Gavaraiah and handed it over to Venkat Rao, Subbaiah loses the peace of his mind and begins to feel depressed and disoriented. He is apprehensive, against all logic, that he might be exposed, arrested and thrown into jail!

Soon however the equations change once again at the office. Subbaiah is unceremoniously sent back to the Despatch Section. He has not cleared Gavaraiah's bills yet, and Gavaraiah has thus not benefited in the least from bribing Subbaiah. He therefore insists, and not always politely, on Subbaiah's returning the money. When Subbaiah in turn asks Venkat Rao to do so, this unscrupulous man dodges the question and instead suggests that he should find the courage to tell Gavaraiah that he would not return the money, come what may. Subbaiah is in a real fix, afraid of the consequences of Gavaraiah's wrath on the one hand, and cursing his powerlessness to extract the money from Venkat Rao on the other. His helplessness and the irrational fear of losing his job, getting arrested, rendering his family destitute and above everything else the increasing severity and frequency of Gavaraiah's threats subject him to an intense psychological conflict. He feels traumatized and rudely shaken by the inner turmoil. It is however not true, as has been erroneously suggested by critics, that the present trauma precipitates an already existing psychological condition in him. There seems to be a deep-seated negative personality trait, an inadequacy at the core of his being, that has rendered him feeble in spirit and mind so that he finds it impossible to act resolutely even when his interests are at stake. He has been, as adumbrated earlier, thoroughly inferiorized and marginalized by all concerned, even by the unidentifiable cultural forces, and consequently his personality and self-esteem have never properly developed.

His suffering is therefore infinitely greater than that of a typical victim of inferiority complex in the West where the trauma one suffers is usually of a personal nature and not culturally determined. And most definitely this trauma does not visit one for being honest and law abiding, even if incompetent. Sadly for Subbaiah, he is slighted, humiliated, demeaned and judged as inefficient by almost everyone for no more 'objectionable' behaviour on his part than hesitating to do things that are potentially disturbing to him.

Like Subbaiah, the other important male characters of the novel too had gone through traumatic experiences early in their lives. For example, Venkat Rao was robbed of whatever material wealth he could have inherited from his

spendthrift father by his own maternal uncle and a long-standing employee of his zamindari household, and

Gavaraiah suffered the ignominy of his wife cheating on him. These experiences, devastating as they are, instead of psychologically destabilizing these two men, only transformed them into hardened individuals. Subbaiah's experiences, naïve by comparison, have made him only a weakling and psychological wreck. There is thus certainly something innate, and something very 'Indian' in him that has subjected him to inferiority complex and made him the man he is—shy and submissive, weak and wavering, insecure and indecisive, timid and compliant, unsure of himself and uncertain in judgement, perennially plagued by doubts and fears, and generally lacking in initiative and drive.

Subbaiah is never completely relieved of his complex while it should be so in a textbook case of inferiority complex, on gaining knowledge of the underlying causes. He is not a wiser man for having gone through the recent traumatic experience either. He is intellectually and culturally too ill equipped to derive any benefit from it. For that reason, and for several other reasons, his creator Ra.Vi.Sastri himself finds it difficult to like him. He explains in the epilogue to the novel:

While writing the final parts of the novel I felt only disgust for Subbaiah. ... I was confirmed in the belief that he was an out and out worthless nincompoop.

But—

I felt that gods, kings and writers should be noble and that they should show the path of righteousness to the posterity. Therefore, when I published the novel in book form I bestowed upon Subbaiah the faculty of soul-searching. He appears to acknowledge his wretchedness and mean spirit and take to the right path at the end. In the final analysis he might take to that path, or he might not. It is left to him.[5]

Subbaiah finds his deliverance from the current crisis—the need to repay Gavaraiah—not because of his own efforts, but because of a variety of forces working independently to help him out. Pothanna, the onetime all purpose man of Gavaraiah, who has some manifest courage and ready sympathy for Subbaiah and his family, boldly tells Gavaraiah's man that Subbaiah would not be returning the money any longer. Blame it on his inferiority complex, but this is something Subbaiah has not been able to do in spite of his best efforts. Venkat Rao, who has drawn our 'hero' into the trouble in the first place and who currently lives with Gavaraiah's estranged wife Ramayamma, threatens Gavaraiah that he would divulge the details of his failed marriage unless Subbaiah is left alone. Avadhani, Subbaiah's colleague, promises Gavaraiah that he would pass his bills only if Subbaiah is not harassed. Above all, the beautiful school teacher Manorama, who unaccountably falls in love with Subbaiah and who happened to once live in the same town as Gavaraiah, pleads with him on Subbaiah's behalf and even offers to make good his loss herself. Gavaraiah finally relents and returns the promissory note that he got Subbaiah to sign under duress.

Manorama enters Subbaiah's beleaguered life like a breath of fresh air. The novelist does not tell us why she takes such a deep interest in him. Whenever a new character is introduced in his novels, it is Ra.Vi.Sastri's practice to give a detailed background of that character. But in Manorama's case he leaves it to the imagination of the readers. An atmosphere of mystery surrounds her. This being very uncharacteristic of Ra.Vi.Sastri's style of writing fiction, R.S. Sudarshanam observes:

Ra.Vi.Sastri does not give any details about her [Manorama's] past or about her family. There lies the beauty of the craftsmanship of the writer. He portrays her only as a human being who empathizes with another human being in trouble. It is not necessary to know her past.[6]

Manorama is fully aware of Subbaiah's unenviable predicament arising out of both his short-term problems such as the ongoing conflict with Gavaraiah and the long term ones such as his incompatibility with his impolite wife and its adverse psychological impact on him. She understands that Subbaiah has been suffering from inferiority complex and because of that nobody takes him seriously, including himself. Nobody understands him; nobody empathizes with him; and nobody loves him. Subbaiah's wife, children, relatives, colleagues (he has no friends at all) and everybody else in society regard him as a nonentity and unworthy of note. Only Manorama feels the urge to show some genuine concern for him, befriend him, and finally fall in love with him. Her love instills in him a modicum of confidence, although he continues to be beset with doubts and misgivings, and dogged by indecision and irrational fears.

Critics, including the perceptive R.S. Sudarshanam, have famously misread the novel and hastily concluded that Subbaiah finally overcomes his inferiority complex due primarily to Manorama's love for him. They seem to have been misled by a passage occurring towards the end of the novel which suggests that Subbaiah experiences a dilemma between the shadows of the past that hold him back, and the light that beckons him towards the future.

With everyone, every minute, it has been "surrender, surrender" so far.

Up until this moment life has been spent like that—humbly, meanly, miserably, depravedly and pathetically.

That darkness has been holding him back.

This light has been propelling him forward. (189)

There is no gainsaying that Manorama's love for him has a positive side to it, but to state that Subbaiah finally puts his complex behind him altogether and realizes his self-worth because of it would be largely incorrect. In all probability Subbaiah will continue with his vacillation, indecisiveness and unfounded fears because, among other things, he is a moral coward, and has been so all his life. This is best established by the fact that he was not averse to accepting the bribe per se, but was terrified of the legal consequences and job security concerns. Adler himself has theorized that inferiority complex resolves itself if the sufferer has a developed social interest.

If one has sufficiently sharpened one's grasp for the connections within the unity of each individual, one will easily understand how the inferiority feeling presses constantly towards its own resolution. The value and significance of this resolution rest totally in the existence and the degree of social interest which at times more strongly, at times less so, determines the fate, the failure, or the possibility for happiness of a person.[7]

Subbaiah's involvement in society is peripheral. He is, in fact, an escapist who instinctually avoids human contact, desperately tries to erect a psychological wall against the demands of community life and is deeply apprehensive about people—yes, including the kindly Manorama—who try to reach out to him. Given this state of mind, he cannot hope to achieve happiness in life since, according to Adler, "true happiness is inseparable from the feeling of giving" and—

... everyone who is deeply unhappy, the neurotic and the desolate person stem from among those who were deprived in their younger years of being able to develop the feeling of community, the courage, the optimism, and the self-confidence that comes directly from the sense of belonging. This sense of belonging that cannot be denied anyone, against which there are no arguments, can only be won by being involved, by cooperating, and experiencing, and by being useful to others. Out of this emerges a lasting, genuine feeling of worthiness.[8]

It is not surprising that Subbaiah has no idea of his worthiness. He does not hope to attain it. Moreover, the fertility of his imagination (which enables him to weave interesting stories about the people passing by his house) does not impart him social interest or the strength of mind to take on the world and face its challenges courageously. It only drags him into the abysmal depths of self-doubt. Ra.Vi.Sastri himself passes the final judgement on Subbaiah.

Cowardice and virtue are incompatible. Cowards cannot be virtuous people; they cannot stand up and be good. There is much guarantee for it.

To be virtuous one needs a mighty heart.[5]

Subbaiah obviously does not have a 'mighty' heart. He does not even feel motivated to overcome his sense of inferiority, let alone strive for actualizing higher aims, which he has not set for himself in any case. He is doomed to live the life of a coward, in utter ignominy, Manorama or no Manorama.

Of the seven Ra.Vi.Sastri novels, finished or unfinished, A Man of No Consequence is easily the best in artistic terms as well as in terms of depicting psychological and social reality. There is a perfect integration of the theme, characters

and narrative technique in it. The application of Adler's theory of inferiority complex is certainly one of its strengths but Ra.Vi.Sastri has taken liberties with the theory. He used it only after his purpose and did not attempt a textbook demonstration of it. One might say that it is an 'Indian' or nativized version of the theory of inferiority complex which Ra.Vi.Sastri employs in this novel in order to enhance its artistic appeal. In the final analysis it would be better not to accord undue importance to this theory and its operation in the novel. Much of aesthetic value would emerge if the novel is studied on its own terms, as a work of art, and without elaborate reference to Adler and his theories.

## Notes

1. R.S. Sudarshanam,"sAhityaMIO dRkpathAlu" (Points of View in Literature) (1968; Vijayawada: Navodaya, 1982) pp 243-44.
2. Ra.Vi.Sastri, "eMduku rAsAnu?" (Why did I Write), appended to alapjeevi (1954; Visakhapatnam: Rachakonda Prachuranalu, 2001) p 199
3. Alfred Adler, Thinkexist.com, 25 May 2007
4. Ra.Vi.Sastri, A Man of No Consequence, trans. Achanta Janakiram (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1994). Telugu original, alapjeevi (1954; Visakhapatnam: Rachakonda Prachuranalu, 2001)
5. Ra.Vi.Sastri, "aakharnO maaTa" (epilogue), Alpajeevi (1954; Visakhapatnam: Rachakonda Prachuranalu, 2001) p191.
6. R.S. Sudarshanam,"sAhityaMIO dRkpathAlu" (Points of View in Literature) (1968; Vijayawada: Navodaya, 1982) p 252
7. Alfred Adler, "Advantages and Disadvantages of the Inferiority Feeling," Superiority and Social Interest: A Collection of Later Writings (1964; New York:W.W. Norton, 1979) p 53.
8. Alfred Adler, from a new translation of "Individual Psychology," Einführung in die neuere Psychologie, 1926, in the AAISF/ATP Archives, 26 May 2007

కీలక పదాలు : రాచకొండ విశ్వనాథ శాస్త్రి, రావి శాస్త్రి, అల్పజీవి, రాజేశ్వర్ మిట్టపల్లి

(3 అభిప్రాయాలు) మీ అభిప్రాయం తెలియచేయండి »

### 1. Dr Christopher Rollason అభిప్రాయం:

July 4, 2007 7:00 am

This is a very interesting and informative article; esp. to those with no direct knowledge of Telugu. The Adler take seems very helpful.

It is indeed a piece of great interest, and a useful contribution to the dialogue between Indian culture and western psychoanalysis.

### 2. Prof G Damodar అభిప్రాయం:

July 6, 2007 2:30 am

The article highlights one of the important traits of personality ...inferiority complex that sets in during one's

childhood itself for some, and later on for some adults. It very often leads to abnormal behaviour hindering one's growth. Adler's theory is very helpful in understanding human behaviour from this perspective. The insignificant man can become a VIP if he shuns his inferiority complex. Dr Rajeshwar's article is insightful and very interesting.

3. **Dr T.S.Chandra Mouli. అభిప్రాయం:**

July 8, 2007 10:36 pm

This is a very interesting article. Dr Rajeshwar has made a significant contribution by providing new insights. He has aptly chosen the story written by Sri Ravi Sastry to highlight his views. It is hoped that this article will be a precursor to more such novel approaches in analysing works of repute.