

Reviewing and Re-Viewing Kannada Women's Fiction and The Concept of Feminism

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In my earlier study I had discussed the definition or formulation of feminism and also raised the difficulty in formulating a definite concept of the term. The paper had also raised queries such as whether feminist theories are useful in understanding women's writing, whether women writers are aware of theories of feminism, whether the women writers write with the conscious purpose of changing the existence of women or do women writers just depict the social and cultural reality. It was also pointed out that in spite of feminist theories in India, feminism is still a long way from achieving any status as most people are of the view that feminism has no roots in India. But it was accentuated that one cannot ignore simple issues of women's problems such as oppression, suppression, submissiveness, socialization, conditioning, patriarchy and indoctrination. It may be that the perception may change due to the conditions one faces and the degree of what one experiences in different parts of the country and also the different levels. In the light of this the present paper is an attempt to review briefly the role of Kannada women writers and their attempt to create a space for the Indian women.

After 1950s Kannada literature witnessed a great change due to the adoption of modern literary trends. The literature that developed was a literature of protest and rebellion. This trend was witnessed mainly in poetry where poets such as V.G. Bhat and Gopalkrishna Adiga began to discuss in their poetry the truth and validity of existence. This theme of protest, rebellion, existential quest and disillusionment was witnessed in the fiction of 50s and 60s too. Illustrations of this can be found in the novels of Vyasraya Ballal and Niranjana. This representation paved the way for the

emergence of one of the greatest novels in Kannada literature depicting the idea of human bondage and liberation, namely, Shivarama Karanth's *Chomanna Dudi*. This novel highlighted for the first time the fundamental problems of faith, untouchability and moral values in Karnataka. Later in 1960s and 1970s one witnessed the growth of writers such as U.R. Ananthamurthy, Shouri Ramanujam and Purnachandra Tejaswi. Among the popular novels of these writers, the one that gained immense popularity was *Samskara*. The novel dealt with the values of the Brahmin class, the disintegration of traditional values and existential struggle of the individuals. It also for the first time brought into limelight the problem of women by casting the role of Chandri and her anguish at the death of her husband. Another novelette that revealed the power and hold of religion and faith on women was *Ghattashraddha*.

The major women writers who have emerged after Independence in Kannada are Triveni, M. K. Indira, Anupama Niranjana, Vaidehi, Veena Shanteshwar, Sara Aboobaker, and others. Among these the writer who has made a big mark in Kannada literature is Anasuya Shankar known by her pen name, Triveni (1928-1963). Triveni has to her credit twenty novels and three collections of short stories. As Tharu and Laitha mention: 'the central forces of Triveni's novels are women. She explores, with considerable insight, the psychological problems faced by middle-class women at different stages in life, and is particularly interested in societies in which women's social status, their educational backgrounds, and their professional involvements are rapidly changing. Triveni sets the individual against a background of the social forces that determine her experience and investigates the origins, especially within the structure of the family, of women's tensions and behavior' (1993: 285). Many Kannada critics think that she was not a feminist but as her novels portrayed a woman's psyche, they were thought to be intolerant towards men.

Each one of Triveni's novels such as *Eradu Kanasu*, *Bekkina Kannu*, *Sharapanjara*, *Belli Modda* depicted the mental anguish and trauma that women faced. It would be just cause to narrate some of the plots so that one can grasp the anxiety and predicament that the women in these novels display. *Belli Moda* discusses the plight of the protagonist who happens to be the daughter of a rich coffee plantation owner. Her marriage is arranged to a doctor, who has returned to India after completion of his studies abroad. After the marriage is arranged and finalized the protagonist's mother has a

late pregnancy and has a male child. Knowing that the male child will inherit the property the husband of the protagonist begins to oppress her and the trauma she faces sandwiched between her loyalty to the husband and her parents is finely sketched. *Sharapanjara* is another powerful novel that discusses the affliction of mental illness and the treatment meted out to women. The protagonist on the birth of her child develops mental depression and this leads to a state of madness—hysteria. Doctors advise the family that this is a common ailment when women give birth and therefore there is no cause for worry. They also give assurance that it is completely curable and all that she needs is plenty of attention and care. Therefore, Kaveri is admitted in a psychiatric ward and with great care and treatment she becomes normal. However, her return home is disappointing for everyone at home cannot get over the fact that she had been mad. Her mother-in-law silently condemns her and does not allow her access to the child, thinking she may harm it. Her husband no longer feels any affection or love for her and her neighbours treat her warily. In such a situation the mental trauma is too much for Kaveri and she succumbs to a relapse.

Her short story taken up for discussion in the present paper is 'Koneya Nirdhara' (Final Decision) which portrays the life of Lalitha Devi who has separated from her husband Venkatesh Murthy as he had 'doubted her virtue and become suspicious of her. He remarries while Lalitha Devi educates herself and becomes a principal in a school. Murthy later comes back to her and requests her to live with him. Lalitha at the point realizes that he wants her back not because of love or attachment to her but for the sake of convenience and comfort. The reader also learns that Murthy's wife is dead and therefore he needs a woman to take care of his house. As the protagonist sums up:

So this man had not come to me wishing to make amends for his mistake! There was neither pity nor love in his request.

Of course, he couldn't remarry at his age. All he needed was a woman to run the house. A woman to mother the orphaned children, a woman to be his wife (1993: 290).

She decides that she can live her own life and turns down his request.

M. K. Indira's (1917) first novel was *Tungabhadra*, which presented the problems of rural women realistically. *Gejje Pooje* is

a novel that dealt with the life of *devadasis* and the difficulty that women had in bringing up their children, especially the girl child. *Phaniyamma*, her award-winning novel, is based on the life of her great aunt. The story deals with the life of Phaniyamma who becomes a child widow within months of her marriage due the death of her child husband. The story documents not only how Phaniyamma is forced to embody tradition but also how to question it. The final passage into the life of a widow is at the onset of menarche where in she is forced to shave her head to make herself unattractive, be restricted to one meal a day and relentlessly serve members of her family. She is conditioned to live a frugal, austere and celibate life. Many feminists do not agree with the novel as they feel that it depicts women in traditional roles. The strong point of the narrative is that the protagonist does re-view various social and cultural constructions in the course of her life. Phaniyamma's story calls into question the tragic circumstances where the female space is constructed and also where the woman's body due to the gender construction is bounded, restricted and marginalized in the name of tradition. The narrative foregrounds the concepts of sexuality and culture, and also reveals that the site of tradition's continuity is through the woman's body. Phaniyamma critiques the space of the male in her perplexed mind even though she herself is shackled to the traditional norms of society. Her critique of tradition emerges at two points once when she is invited to help with a difficult childbirth of a lower caste woman and later when she has to give verdict regarding the passage of a young girl into widowhood. In the first instance the words of the women in the family reveal the deep internalization of values:

Back at the house, each one turned to look at the other. Phaniyamma's brother's daughter-in-law burst out, 'Just before she died, Malakka wanted to eat some fish. It's just like that. I really wonder why such a thought entered Ancheyatte's mind. She's gone on pilgrimages, she's done the *rishipanchami* regularly—why is she going into that untouchable area now? What were they doing these four days that woman's been in labor, those sons of foolish widows? Eating mud? And now they've come to call her—at this odd hour of the night! And she—ready to go when they call. There's little to choose between them if you ask me—they that ask them that go! And now tomorrow she'll have to undertake the *panchganya* ceremony to purify herself.'

This was the first time that the people in the house were displeased with Ancheyatte, or Post Mother, which is what they called Phaniyamma. They lowered the wick of the lantern, and as they went to sleep each one had something to say to the other (1989: 80).

Phaniyamma reasons against her action by reminding herself that her grandmother often used to say that doing one's duty at a single birth is as good as making a pilgrimage to Kashi. And here she had saved two lives, which could only mean that it should be even more meritorious (1989: 81). Phaniyamma, thus tried to reason within herself and comfort her tormented soul.

Eventually she raises her voice against these oppressive traditions to interrogate on behalf of another young widow. Evocatively, she questions:

Why should I say anything? I never even saw my husband's face and this poor girl with her man for two years. Our times were different. Everything's changed now. Those who live in the city and are old enough to have grandchildren don't even feel the need to shave their heads. Does all the impurity rest there? What punishment do you want for a child who has just opened her eyes (1989:109)?

Anupama Niranjana (1934-1991) was trained in medicine besides being a novelist and short story writer. She fought against male bias and gender discrimination and was attracted by leftist ideals. Her first major work is *Madhavi* published in 1976. Her other important works are *Ele (Thread, 1980)*, and *Gosha (A Rallying Cry, 1985)*. Her autobiography *Nenapu Sihi Kahi (Bitter Sweet Memories)* was brought out in 1985. In 1986 she published *Manini* a collection of articles on the situation of women. She won the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi award in 1978. She also wrote medical treatises to help women to take care of their lives such as *Dampatiya Deepika, Jayi-Magi, Vadhuviye Kivimatu*. Her short story "Ondu Ghatana Mattu Antara" (An Incident – and After) discusses the issue of rape and the aftermath.

Vaidehi (Jankai Srinivas Murthy, 1945) is among the younger generation of writers. She has three collections of short stories *Mara Gida Balli, 1979, Antarangade Putagalu, 1984, Gola, 1986* and a novel, *Asprushayaru (Untouchables, 1982)*. Her contention is that she explores human condition. As she states, 'However much we understand, we are thrown into a world of mystery – that is nature. And that is the nature of the individual also.... I feel that the domineering old faiths are withering away and my inner voice

begins to be audible, as if from a distance ... what a long journey it has been to hear one's inner voice! I may have traveled long to get to the source of this voice ... but the quest has been as good as the quest for the knowledge of the whole universe' (cited in Tharu and Lalitha, 1993).

Veena Shanteshwar has published *Mullugalu*, 1968; *Koneya Dari*, 1972; *Kavalu*, 1976 and *Hasivu*, 1984. Her novels include *Gandasaru*, 1975, *Soshane*, *Bandaya*, *Ityadi* (Exploitation, Revolt and so on, 1984) and *Adrishita*, 1990. She is a recipient of the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award. The protagonists of her stories were earlier rebels against established society and conventional morality, but in the later ones they compromise with life. Veena Shanteshwar feels that this has happened because she has understood that 'however independent and aggressive and powerful an Indian woman may be, she has still to go a long way before she is liberated in the real sense'. She further states that, 'At present a liberated woman is an outcast in our society, a miserable creature, with no sympathy or support anywhere ... perhaps this is a transitional period. She is yet to emerge as the truly New Woman who can defy everything that binds her and yet to be happy. It's a slow, painful, trying and uphill task' (cited in Tharu and Lalitha, 1993: 526).

The story that is taken up for discussion is 'Avala Svantantrya' (Her Independence). In this story the protagonist has at one time being an ardent follower of feminism and has discussed and debated during her younger days, on the issues of feminism. Her marriage and increasing family responsibility, however, change her lifestyle and her ideas of women's upliftment and emancipation. The burden of family tightens around her, and she realizes that her ideas of women's liberation, etc are just not possible to follow practically. She has to commute everyday for her job in another town and she is forced to leave her children with her father-in-law not knowing whether the children are well cared for. Added to this anxiety is the fact that her husband, Shankar works in a different town and he gets to come home only on weekends. Even when he comes home, he expects his wife to give him the relaxation he needs forgetting that she too may need a lending hand. If this is her situation at home, for many women who know her outside she is thought to be an independent woman who can take her stand on women's issues and discuss such aspects. As the lady who insists that she comes to deliver a speech for the International Women's Day states:

How strange to hear you speak this way, Vimala. I can't believe you are the same person who used to talk about working for women's upliftment, women's emancipation not so long ago! Surely you don't think of our work like some others do —as propaganda or a passing fashion. You know that women, especially middle-class women like you and me, face thousands of problems In all of Hubli or Dharwad, there's no better person than you to talk about these things (1994: 528).

Here one is made aware of the paradox of the situation. At the point in the story the lady who invites Vimala is only aware of Vimala's passion for women's empowerment and liberation but she is not privy to Vimala's plight at home. It is the reader who can understand her threshold existence, sandwiched by the Indian woman's loyalty to family and her urge for some freedom in her life. As the protagonist muses:

.... Perhaps Shankar could help. Also the baby needed to go to the doctor for check-up. She wondered how the child had spent the day with his grandfather... Also, Neelu needed cloth for her uniform.... This could be done in the evening. Maybe in the morning Shankar could go to the depot and get some firewood (1994: 531).

Even though at no point in the story Vimala's feelings of childbirth and children are brought forth, yet the reader can subtly understand the husband's callous behaviour towards his wife for pleasure, which may have been the cause of three children. She is also made aware that her husband unburdened of all family responsibility may be living a very different life for she has no means of checking how he lives there:

She thought of her father-in-law's remarks, 'Lives alone ... far away' Belgaum, the lodge who knows how he lives, what he does... The insurance policy, the monsoon, the fuel, the baby's fever, father-in-law's stomach ache, cooking office, the local train.... She sank down, momentarily overwhelmed.

This sense of being overwhelmed concludes by the following lines: '... Hubli's town hall was filled with women that Sunday evening. They listened to Shrimati Vimala Shankar with curiosity and with admiration.' (1994: 532)

Sara Aboobaker's *Chandragiri Theeradalli* (Breaking Ties) exposes the orthodoxy, cruelty and helplessness faced by Muslim women. The story is based on the life of three women protagonists, Amina

and her daughters Nadira and Jamila. The novel, to an extent, is autobiographical as it depicts Sara's own life of oppression in a Muslim family suffering due to gender and religion. Muhammed Khan is caught in the vortex of poverty and not having male progeny. He lives on Amina's earnings while Nadira and Jamila grow up without any education. Later, Nadira gets married to Rashid, who is not only educated and urbane but also wishes to educate his wife. Khan, however wrecks the happy marriage by his cruel and brutal behaviour towards Rashid for refusing him a loan. Khan in a fit of anger brings away Nadira and the grandson. On the other side, Rashid's mother unable to live without her grandson brings back the child from Khan's house. The child thus grows up without the mother and Nadira's life is wrecked without her husband and child. Khan adds to her misery by trying to get her to marry an rich, old man. Nadira resists but by tricking Rashid to say *talaq* thrice, Nadira's life is sealed. Even though Nadira and Rashid wish to live together the clergy put their foot down. The story questions the authenticity of religion, relationships between men and women, unquestioning authority of men and religion.

The queries that arise at this juncture are why am I looking at this literature, what idea of feminism do I notice, are these women's novels or feminist novels, do these writers subscribe to feminism, can western feminism be part of this study, can I expose these novels/ stories to the ideas of body and sexuality, etc. The main reason for reading fiction of these linguistic regions is my awareness of not only the two languages but also some knowledge of the tradition and culture of the two regions. My belief in initiating such a study is that it may raise awareness of the latent female traditions and highlight the idea of women's space, aspirations, ambitions, anguish and paradoxes. I am not yet sure if these writings do portray any feminism but they do question women's roles in society. The fiction speaks against tradition and cultural norms. Of course one could argue that these are just women's novels and not feminist ones. My argument at the moment is based on the idea that feminism does not mean a political stance. It can be just the simple task of illuminating women's attitude towards life encounters and experiences. It is basically the inscription of feminist subject positions in women's writing, which determine its radicalness and not just the author's biological sex, or depiction of typical experience. Feminism is in other words speaking and the outlining the strategies of formulation that thrust women's lives forward.

In fact, if one considers Feminism has not emanated from the

women who are victimized or oppressed. The victims, in most cases compromise and reconcile to their fate. Suffering is not necessarily a fixed and universal experience that can be measured by a single parameter. It is related to situations, needs and aspirations. However, there must be some historical and political parameter for the use of the term so that political priorities can be established and different forms and degrees of suffering can be given most attention. It was in the light of this perception that the present study was undertaken. Difference that I could locate in the western and Indian perspectives is the concept of dualism or binariness. Western ideas deal with concepts such as culture/nature, body/ mind, and emotion and reason. In the Indian scenario such concepts cannot be distinguished. Further the distinction that arise from such a concept such as reproduction and production and others are only nullified in Indian feminist thought. The key concepts I think I would need to dwell on is the idea of power, body and difference. Power is important, as it need not be just economic and could arise due to many other aspects. The emphasis on the body is important for it allows one to think 'how discourses and practices, create ideologically appropriate subjects but also how these practices construct certain sorts of body with particular kinds of power and capacity' (Destabilizing Theory). The differences of gender as well as caste, class, position, etc would also reveal their own implications. Much of contemporary literary criticism analyses the female body through categories of tradition, modernization, patriarchy and dissemination. In Avadesh Kumar Singh's view the Indian feminists do not show radical departure as the western feminists do. He states:

Yet they [Indian feminists] do not show radical departure of the kind of the western feminism which proposed insulation of the world of women from that of the men before entering the post-feminist era. The reason for this may be that the family still exists in India despite many blows to it and if it exists though in its changed form, the credit for it should go to women. The radical individualism of the west has found favour with the Indian mind that by nature or whole universe (2001: 127).

Now the other query is why do these women not subscribe to feminism? This is a difficult question to answer and the only easy thing that I could do is to accept the words of Jasbir Jain where in she states:

Most women writers who protest against being labeled as feminist are

doing so for a variety of reasons, some of which can be studied as follows: the reader-critic reads them selectively and glosses over their subtexts; the media and the market view them as woman-to-woman writers, i.e. women who write about women and address a female readership; a lot of research and reviewing is confined to this slot and stereotypes them; they are identified with victim-literatures and this limits the perception of their experiment or aesthetics; feminism is still not viewed as an individual's right to grow, but as militant rebellion bent upon indiscriminately destroying all social and moral codes or the 'new' woman is seen as a promiscuous one... (2001: 85).

Besides these one must be aware of the number of other problems that originate in placing these texts within the discourse of feminism. Some of these are caste, class, economic dependence, fragmentation, the sway of superstition, and the essential nature of religions. Moreover, identity can be partly a construct or part of internal self. When it is external it could be formed by the elements of education, marriage, family morality, linguistic constructs, custom, and law, while individual consciousness could distinguish a self as an individual.

In conclusion, I would like to state that women writers are generally aware of the problems and restrictions that women face in the social set-up of India. Of course, the degree and the manner of restrictions differ from region to region, caste to caste, and class to class. Consciously or unconsciously the women writer takes up the task of portraying women's anguish either matter-of-factly or in a subversive manner. Whatever the manner, Indian women writers unlike the western women writers do not adopt modern or postmodern techniques of narrative. They adopt a methodology wherein they highlight and foreground the principal character's thoughts, actions as well as their relationships with others in society. It is essential to identify that women's cultural identity in the Indian setting is built upon her interaction with various members of the family. Moreover, it is inherently recognized that Indian women, whatever their background are socialized and conditioned to accept the superior attitude of men, especially their husbands. Their obedience and faithfulness to their children is another aspect that is part of their psyche, which also indicates that to provide a good family background to children they may, in many cases, resist the temptation of breaking away from their husbands, thereby leading to a more positive attitude of

conforming. Within this conformity, however, the women realize their inner selves and in many cases attempt to actualize their potential.

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