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Texts as Sites of Social Reforms: Revisiting *Indira Bai* and *Chandramukhiya Ghatavu*

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Abstract:

The 19th century has been an era of socio-political and cultural changes due to integration of nationalism and reformism in India. The English educated Indians focused on the evils of Indian society and ways to mitigate the same. Literature of this age that happened to be the vehicle of deep anguish reflected the mood of the period. Among various issues, the intelligentsia was preoccupied with the questions concerning women. The present paper, by revisiting *Indira Bai* (1899) by Gulwadi Venkata Rao and *Chandramukhiya Ghatavu (The Fall of Chandramukhi)* (1900) by Rodda Venkata Rao-both in Kannada- aims to discover the stamp of radical thinking which negotiated with the forces of reformism and orthodoxy simultaneously. This paper juxtaposes the situations of two women and the kind of debates that they instigate within the framework of respective novels and establishes how text became a formidable site for addressing social issues and also for initiating reformative measures.

Keywords: Social reform, women's question, widow remarriage.

Novels have been viewed as the sites of debate and discussion of the events happening in a society at a particular period of time. This claim assumes greater importance when it comes to post-colonial societies which underwent subtle, yet significant, changes during the colonial rule. The changes ushered in by colonialism and the after-effects resulting from the clash of two cultures which are implicit even to this day are supposed to have been well documented by the literature of the colonized societies. This is true in case of India too. Literature, specifically novels, in India has responded to the social and political changes heralded by colonialism on the physical and cultural space of the country. In this background, an evaluation of the function of the novel becomes a necessity. Novel, with which we are concerned presently, did not take birth in vacuum, but in societal phenomenon that is as complex as human personality. Therefore an objective analysis of the novels of that era occupies centre stage even to this day and consequently it becomes an intriguing endeavor to revisit the novels of a particular time in order to unearth the cultural memories of a country. 'The century long European political domination of the rest of the world being finally over, the time seems to have come to reckon with its civilizational aftermath, making it necessary to undertake a rigorous scrutiny of the continuities and ruptures in the decolonized societies' (Mukherjee). It is within this setting, that the present article purports to revisit two pre-independent narratives in Kannada, *Indira Bai* (1899) authored by Gulwadi Venkat Rao and *Chandramukhiya Ghatavu* (1900) written by Rodda Venkatrao in order to demonstrate the efforts of the novelists to engage with the forces shaping the cultural milieu of a society.

The admission of novels into India marks a milestone in the Indian literary scene. The defining character of literature of this age raises two critical questions. First, how did the growth of this particular *genre* of literature become a reality? Second, why did India have to wait till the last decade of the 19th century for the arrival of this particular *genre* of literature? Two changes stand out in prominence when questions are raised; one is language and the other is the model of education. English as a medium of instruction and the introduction of modern education brought out noteworthy alterations in the country. The entry of printing press in India, the preference that the prose was gaining over other forms of literature, the emergence of periodicals and the rise of the newly educated middle class – all these factors proved to be congenial for the growth of novels in India. The rising sentiment of nationalism that was getting blended with that of reformism found its expression in the early novels. Indeed, the novels of that age were mainly reformist in nature and were penned largely by those intellectuals who were also, incidentally, the products of Western education. Such novels successfully documented nearly metamorphic changes in terms of socio-political and cultural spheres that took place in the 19th century India. The emerging English educated Indian ‘desi’ class was thus trying its best to articulate its concern over aspects pertaining to Indian society and culture. Shivaram Padikkal observes that such intelligentsia started to feel a sense of alienation and it was this ‘trishanku’ elite desi class that began searching for its social identity that became active in the political, social and cultural spheres of the 19th century India (Padikkal p 38). Some such intellectuals started to express their concern towards nation and her society through literature and for majority of them novels offered a readymade tool to reflect upon social issues. Thus literature in general and novels in particular - that were making its mark during the same period – created a perfect space for the expression of such reflections. Therefore, the early novels in India busied themselves with the task of reforming the existing society. These intellectuals had formed a certain idea of ideal society and began to probe into the intricate structure of Indian society with the new cultural tools acquired through modern education.

However, among the various social issues that were investigated by the early novels, the ‘question of women’ occupies the central space. Works of significant importance and number were produced during the period on the issues concerning women in almost all the languages of the country. Partha Chatterjee notes how ‘the ‘WOMEN’S QUESTION’ was a central issue in some of the most controversial debates over social reforms in the early and mid nineteenth century Bengal – the period of so called ‘renaissance.’ (Chatterjee, p 233) However, Partha Chatterjee’s observations seem to be acceptable when one gives a cursory look at the various novels written during 1890 to 1900 not only in the Bengal region but all over the country. These narratives clearly demonstrate the writer’s pre occupations about the status of women in the Indian society. ‘Fashioning of a new ‘secular self’ and transformation of a traditional society into a modern and modernizing one was always linked to the project of rethinking woman’s role in family and society. The novel as a mode of writing was an ideal vehicle to articulate this project’ (Padikkal p 212-213). In this connection, it is interesting to probe why and how some of the early novelists were anxious with the issues concerning women amidst various other problems that had crept into Indian society. Through addressing women’s issues these writers tried to examine the contemporary mindset of the society or their community about woman who was ‘considered to be a non- entity whose only obligation was to attend to the needs of her family’ (Agarwal). This acted as a springboard for the early novelists to link the sufferings of woman to superstitious practices and beliefs which resulted in sick society. Such linkage provided not only

width but also depth to their novels. It is with this background that the early novels set the stage for the women who emerge successfully against all odds of the conservative society in which their lives are shaped. This is more than evident in Gulwadi Venkatarao's novel *Indira Bai* that makes a strong plea for remarriage of widows. Many years after the stage was set by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Gulwadi Venkatarao took up the cudgels and began the debates regarding widow remarriage and women's emancipation that came to be linked with the building of a modern nation. This was also the concern of major intellectuals particularly the writers. '... the problem of Hindu widows had been very much the concern of writers in India from the mid- nineteenth century (Mukherjee, p 29).

Indira Bai, being considered the first Kannada social novel, narrates the story of child widow Indira as she struggles to carve a better life for herself. Gulwadi Venkatarao here represents the Saraswata community of Mangalore as the community faced crisis due to new reform measures advocated by certain educated classes of the same community to which Venkatrao also belonged. It should also be noted that, the changes began with the Western coastal region coming under the missionary activities and Macaulay system of education of which English was an integral part. It was natural for the writer hailing from such region to depict the picture of the society to which he belonged. 'Here, Venkatarao rewrites the problems of his Chitrapur Saraswat community at the turn of century and the clamour for reforms from the educated progressive members of the community' (Rao, p 9). The agenda of the novel *Indira Bai* gets clearly established with the author stressing on widow remarriage and education of women as the device for emancipation. The novel not only presents the 'story of a hapless woman struggling against orthodoxy and cruelty, but also of her victory promising the emergence of an enlightened generation' (Das, p 298). Indira, the only daughter to her parents Bhimarao and Ambabai is married to a squandering man who ignores her having completely immersed in luxurious living. He is indifferent to Indira who has not yet attained puberty. On the other hand, Indira pines for him again and again. She bears the jeering of her friends in silence while her mother consoles her by advising her to read 'the Gita, abhangs, stutis and stotras...' (p 118). Paradoxically, Indira's habit of reading books borrowed from her school going friend irks her mother who expresses her anguish "oh she is reading books by the mlechchha padres meant to destroy our caste. This could be disastrous! (p 118)."

Indira's life begins to sink with the death of her husband and she is forced to lead a widow's life with a series of restrictions. Indira is warned against combing her hair and is further instructed to wear only white saree. Fearing that Indira's attitude may be transformed due to her readings, her parents arrange for regular bhajans by a group of Swamis at their house. We are informed that this group wanders from place to place and people leave the unwanted widows of their houses with the group so that they can help the Swamis in their work. Meanwhile Indira escapes from the clutches of the leader of the group who approaches her with malevolent intentions. She runs away from her house and takes shelter with a reformist lawyer Amritaraya and his wife Jalajakshi who have also incidentally sheltered Bhaskara, a young promising youth whom they have been supporting in his studies. Bhaskara turns out to be the son of Sundararaya whom Indira's parents have poisoned several years ago on the assumption that he is spreading gossips about their family. Indira's life changes for good once she is at the lawyer's house. Her youth blooms with the loving care and tender treatment of the couples who become her family now. Indira begins to spend most of her time in reading. The couple defies the orthodoxy and Indira is

even sent to a school in Satara so that her deep desire for studies can be fulfilled. The school 'Saraswati Mandir' is run by Pandita Anandi Bai and it shows the profound concern of Venkatarao towards women's education. Such minute details clearly serve as model within which the novelist tries to bring out the issue of female education. The lawyer and his wife accordingly introduce lot of changes in Indira's life while her real parents become too skeptical about her activities. However, everything turns out well with Bhaskara, who returns to India as an ICS officer, readily agreeing to marry Indira. He admonishes the practice of young girls being married off at the age when they cannot even differentiate between good and bad. He questions the meaning of statements and practices like widowed women should not appear before men by contrasting the very practice with one more practice of tonsuring the widow's head by the barbers who are also men. He strongly believes that when young girls become widows they should get married again. Finally all ends well and there is a happy reunion of Indira with her real parents too.

If *Indira Bai* talks directly about widow remarriage *Chandramukhiya Ghatavu* by Rodda Venkatrao and translated into English as *The Fall of Chandramukhi* by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao traces the impact of the decadence of the Hindu society of his time and the bearing of such decline on women. The women's question surfaces rather indirectly for the focus here is more on unraveling the tricky nature of a fake sanyasi and his misadventures,

"The themes of *Chandramukhiya Ghatavu* are the blind beliefs and superstitions that afflict Hindu society, and how women are made to suffer to uphold these dubious beliefs' (Rao,xviii).

The novel that instills curiosity in the beginning itself opens rather abruptly with the narrator- a reporter for Pioneer- receiving a telegram from his Police Inspector friend Dharendra. As per the instructions, our narrator starts immediately to Alipore and receives from his friend an autobiography of a Sanyasi. The narration then shifts to Haradatta who speaks to us through his autobiography. We learn that Haradatta, the tollgate keeper in the Bengal area hails from a good Brahmin family. Being educated he is dissatisfied with his low paid job which he has taken up as he had to 'carry on my livelihood due to lack of money and food' (p 5). As he himself admits, the money is insufficient, for he has 'succumbed to too many terrible habits right from childhood.' Haradatta is frank enough to disclose that he adopts all methods to squeeze the 'poor and pious people ,wringing their necks, sitting on their chests and making them throw up whatever they have' (p 6). His life takes a plunge with his marriage and the expansion of the family. 'Mounting debts, family worries, job frustrations and livelihood anxieties' leave him distressed. But he is not ready to live and die like a 'worm'. He prepares some 'false papers', steals three thousand rupees and quits his job. Seized by an idea to take advantage of the blind beliefs of the people around, he assumes the new role of a sanyasi thus announcing his arrival rather grandly and theatrically,

"Aha! Citizens of Aryavarttha! Do you know how much you are destroyed by the blind faith? O' unfortunate motherland! Your country is being stripped off in the name of religion by swindlers like me. In spite of this, you won't even stir a bit. The human beast that drives away the visitors and doesn't give even a handful of grain to beggars now follows me dancing intoxicatingly seeking happiness. And it squanders away thousands of rupees for my pleasure' (p 7).

With this begins his new life as a fake sanyasi who is now freed from ‘pestering by the money lenders and harassment by superiors’ (p 8). His extensive travels and melodious Hari bhajans win him more devotees and disciples and he ‘profits enormously’ by utilizing the so called loopholes of Hindu society which according to him is like ‘a blind creature without a torch’, ‘an ox which turns to whichever direction it is prodded to move’ and ‘a puppet which dances to any tune’. This society according to Haradatta has ‘long ago sacrificed proper thinking and acting upon it with mental and moral courage. It believes strongly in the godliness of its ancestors. Its belief is in the divine ability! Its trust is in mantriks. Women are slaves and men are rulers here’ (p 9). With his tricks Haradatta, now the fake sanyasi, manages to catch the attention of Mohinikantha the rich Zamindar who invites this sanyasi to solve his family problems. The family members expect Haradatta to bless Chandramukhi, Mohinikantha’s sister who is childless. Chandramukhi is encouraged by her husband and brother to serve this sanyasi for there is a belief that people would be blessed with children if they serve this sanyasi. Mesmerized by her beauty and devotion, Haradatta gives her intoxicated milk with the intention to seduce her. Unfortunately Chandramukhi dies soon after consuming the milk and the Police finally manage to catch him up with the help of Balabheema, Mohinikantha’s brother who is all committed to uplift Hindu women.

Rodda Venkatrao seems to establish his views about the corruption of Hindu society through Balabheema. Balabheema is sensitive enough to understand the plight of young Chandramukhi and raises many questions about her status. ‘Till the day of the wedding, she wouldn’t have even seen his face, how will the young girl who is now married to him know what love is? The girl who is still a child playing with dolls at home, will she have selfless love for her husband?’ (p 15). He feels sorry for the girls like Chandramukhi, ‘are these young girls, who are incapable of answering these questions let alone think about them, ready for marriage?’ (p 15). His questions provoke even the readers to think ‘why isn’t it surprising that we don’t have the broadening of the mind and psychological maturity that develops with proximity to love?’ (p 15). By getting such young girls married, Balabheema thinks that our society has reached its lowest point. He accuses that ‘thoughtlessness, insolence and deception’ (p 23) of people around Chandramukhi are responsible for her death. Deeply disturbed by her death, Balabheema becomes a ‘Brahmo Samaj Sanyasi’ dedicating himself for the life of a wanderer and a preacher.

Two Indias

Indira Bai and *Chandramukhiya Ghtavu* were the two Kannada novels that were published in the last quarters of the 19th century. They share certain similarities with regard to the addressing of the problems of a society at a point of time and send some strong message that everything is not right here. The writers, however, take different routes. Indira shows that through education a woman can change her own destiny where as Chandramukhi pays a heavy price for being lost in the web of beliefs that others have spun for her. She neither retaliates nor shows any attempts to change her destiny and as a result she is unable to rise but fall. Indira Bai struggles to carve a better future for herself through her indomitable spirit on the one hand whereas Chandramukhi on the other hand, succumbs to the pressures of the same society. *Indira Bai* also depicts many social aspects that were getting discussed at that time - that of women’s education and widow remarriage, sea voyage, and the rigidity of the rituals. In *Chandramukhiya Ghatavu* the novelist blends the women’s issues with that of superstitious beliefs. In fact, both the texts present two

Indias within the annals. One is the so called conservative world dominated by Indira's parents who offer their resistance to their daughter's plans to educate herself and decide her destiny. On the other hand there are people like the reformist lawyer and his wife who dwell in the so called liberal world. Bhaskara too is projected as an enlightened individual. Indira's parents who are scornful of her attempts in the beginning mellow down at the end. Initially they who tried to chain Indira in the name of customs and traditions finally get reunited with her. That shows the so called conservative Indian society can readily accommodate changes. Similarly people like Chandramukhi's husband and brother are shown as a part of the conservative world full of rigid practices and beliefs. At the same time Balabheema emerges as the face of the progressive world. The novels thus present two Indias that were confronting each other during the beginning of the twentieth century and this confrontation also highlights the kind of intellectual responses that such cultural changes provoked.

The two texts thus present the way the educated intelligentsia perceived the loopholes of the Indian society at the time when the country was opening herself for the new ideological influences. The novels become a space for these writers not only to posit certain specific problems concerning women but also to ask serious questions about the way of the life around them. Novels become tools in the hands of early writers to clinically examine our society at a particular point of time and also to offer certain corrective measures to overcome what they considered the problems of a social set up. A revisit to the two texts, thus, depicts the genuine concerns of our early intellectuals with regard to Indian society and their passion for reforms. Texts became a site for addressing the issues of the society and also for initiating reform measures that could have had far reaching effects on the mindset of a generation of nation.

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