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Reinstating the Literary Aesthetics of Telugu Folk Songs in G. Kalyana Rao's Untouchable Spring

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Jyothsna writes stories that have appeared in many journals and anthologies.

Abstract

The paper tries to focus on the natural, participatory, and linguistic elements of Telugu folk songs in particular, presented in the novel *Untouchable Spring*. Telugu folk songs, presented through the characters in the novel, correspond to Wordsworth's propositions on the elements of poetry. Do the folk songs employ the spontaneous overflow of emotions, explained by Wordsworth? Does the novelist try to deconstruct the very understanding of art? In what way caste oppression influence the folk songs? Are the questions the paper tries to answer? The novel by creating the alternative aesthetics, focuses on the naturalness not only in language, but in the activities where people in the village are involved in. the novel also proposes that, the folk art shouldn't be considered insignificant. Folk art gives a space where the villagers can find themselves. The novel also stresses on the sense of othering, experienced by the urban reader, but can relate with the aesthetically pleasing images. The paper tries to focus on these nuances of folk art, presented in the novel.

Keywords

Literary aesthetics, *Untouchable Spring*, Caste discrimination, folk poetics

Songs keep the stories alive, recreating lived experiences of people tuned in, to make the listeners participate in the lived experiences, where sense of othering is re-enforced sometimes. . Kalyana Rao's Telugu novel *Antarani Vasantham* (2006) is one such novel where songs re-enact the lived realities of people, besides the novel being a testimony of victims who experienced untouchability and oppression continued for generations where the marginalized couldn't

even have equal access to the basic human rights. The novel *Antarani Vasantham* translated into English by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar as *Untouchable Spring* (2010) carries the exact literary undertones of Telugu folk songs for the English reader, while questioning the long-continued oppression. Kalyana Rao presents the unrecognized aspects of literary aesthetics preserved in Telugu folk songs in this novel, besides portraying the hunger and social inequalities. With the metaphors and connotations specific to the rustic language, Kalyana Rao re-enforces the sense of othering for the person of refined speech, but the othering is presented in aesthetically pleasing way. From the autobiographical elements of this novel, the reader can understand that Kalyanarao himself experienced the aesthetic beauty of a rural landscape, hence his portraiture of the rural landscape is authentic and pure in the novel. One such example is the repeated references to the imaginary bird 'Yennelapitta' which can be transliterated as the bird of moonlight. The translators of the novel retain the original Telugu word 'Yennelapitta' to reflect the original flavour of Telugu folk diction. By signifying the word as 'Yennelapitta', Kalyana Rao deviates from the standard Telugu urban speech where the word 'Yennela' which means moonlight is spoken as 'Vennela'. With the stress on the folk diction through the word 'Yennela' Kalyana Rao creates the alternative aesthetics. This very act of portraying the real speech of the people in the village, further corresponds to the very essence of creating the natural world, where folk art emerges.

Kalyana Rao's main intension of presenting this novel with seven generations of people from Mala community is to expose the caste hierarchy and oppression, but it is interesting to observe how he paints the folk poetics against this backdrop, where limited space is found to the writer to deal with the literary aspects of a language. Kalyana Rao is successful in giving voice to the unheard aspects of folk diction

and aesthetics with his emphasis on the capabilities of folk art in preserving the familiar world of the people, clarity of thought, and spontaneous metaphors. The novel itself takes the form of the folk art, as it presents the story through Ruth's narrative, where she tries to talk of her husband Ruben's family, his father, his grandfather, and his ancestors, who gave priority to the folk art. Ruth herself is a writer in the modern context of Telugu literature, is deeply dissatisfied of her own writings or the sources from where she gets the inspiration to write. Ruth asks her grandmother for more stories, thinking if she can take a clue from those oral stories to have her unique stories. Ruth unlearns her understanding of aesthetics, when her husband Ruben tells her about the compositions of Yellanna his grandfather, composed for his grandmother Subhadra. Folksongs have the stock reality, that reality strikes the understanding of aesthetics. The novel presents the song as something which people can't be separated from. As it is written in the novel, "The song was born from every work done on the earth. Planting saplings, plucking weeds, harvesting the crop and labouring, the coolie mother sang. To forget hunger, to forget the child crying out for milk, to forget the pain of the bent back, Pallavi was heard from the silent voice." (Rao 41) The folk song's very essence of being a part of the oppressed daily work, becomes the inspiration and a reason to abandon his village for Yellanna.

Boodevi, Yellanna's aunt is instrumental in making the child Yellanna to be imaginative and sensitive towards his environment. While Boodevi sings what is taught to her by her elders, or whatever she picked from listening when others sing, Yellanna changes those songs according to his own understanding. Yellanna, the song weaver, makes the songs a part in the lives of people around him. Yellanna's character reflects on the naturalness the folk art has. "Yellanna did not write songs. He knew no alphabet to write them in. All he had was a feeling heart, a shareable experience, tear-shedding

eyes, swelling nerves, a turbulent blood-stream . . . that was it, the song would weave itself. He wove the song like that” (Rao 5). As Wordsworth notes in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, poetry is to be written in the language of the common people, experiences which are to be relatable, Yellanna's songs correspond to these propositions, as his songs are rich with the spontaneous emotional overflow, the language is rustic, and reflect the tranquillity what Wordsworth proposes: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity:” (Wordsworth), Yellanna's childhood frames such a canvas of vivid landscapes, an essential quality of folk art, although his childhood has the shades of darker memories of being discriminated on the grounds of cast. Kalyana Rao makes the reference to the popular Telugu play *Chenchu Lakshmi*, and the popular Telugu song ‘chettulekkagalava?’ in this novel, where Yellanna changes the lyrics in accordance to the images and experiences his childhood prompts.

Kalyana Rao also criticizes the domination of Literature written in urban Telugu speech and learned poets discarding the folk traditions as trivial. The village in focus in the novel *Yennela Dinni*, is modelled on the village with the typical caste division, where Malas and Madigas are repeatedly humiliated by the upper cast people, where their art forms also are underrepresented. Yellanna's songs thus try to preserve the Mala struggles. The village itself carries folk art in it. “Reuben said that to think of Yennela Dinni was to remember the flute tunes that are born between the lips of the untouchable.” (Rao 4). Yellanna's life was at the lower level of horizontal line. That dividing line makes his poetic voice sharp, at the same time preserving the beauty of language. One such example for his imaginative sense is the word ‘chukkala muggu karra’, which can be transliterated as the scale of rangoli stars, to talk about the beauty of Subhadra. When Yellanna calls Subhadra as ‘Chukkala muggu karra’, he blends the unreachable beauty of

stars and something which is available or reachable instantly, as a scale. Yellanna's phrases reveal the combination of words or images which are abstract and concrete, objects far away and reachable. With this tangible and unique combination, he weaves songs, where people can find themselves. Subhadra becomes a song in his imagination. Subhadra's life, her speech and her beauty are real, which make Yellanna's poetic heart to respond. Subhadra is different from the protagonists of Sanskrit and Telugu texts written by the writers who are not part of the marginalized casts. "Shakuntala of Kalidasa and Varudhini of Allasani of the past, the recent Yenki of Nanduri and the present Kinnera of Viswanatha are all imagined beauties." (Rao 97). Subhadra is the real beauty, not having enough access to the high standards of living due to the caste-based oppression she is subjected to. And at the same time, Yellanna couldn't get noticed in the literary world of his contemporary times, because of his unprivileged situation. The novel questions the very sense of reality and literary imagination. "A real-life picture that combines blood, flesh and breath. Even so, it is not Kshetrayya's song. Not Annamayya's song. Not Tyagayya's song. Not the golden tamarind leaf pendant for Sita. A mala's life. A madiga's life . . . An untouchable's song." (Rao 97)

With the particular phrase like 'Chukkala muggu karra', Kalyana Rao presents the very aspect of personifications which blend naturally in folk art. As Wordsworth tries to justify his choice of poems to be included for *Lyrical Ballads*, in terms of using personifications which are natural to a language, "...but in these Poems I propose to myself to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men, and I do not find that such personifications make any regular or natural part of that language. I wish to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him." (Wordsworth). Yellanna's personification here blends in the natural sense, as it talks of a human form, which

is delicate like a scale made of rangoli stars. This kind of a phrase, signifies the company of individuals with flesh and blood, preserved in folk songs, presented in the novel. Yellanna's songs are not set against the traditional metre, the ragas or don't have the devotion as their main theme, but a stock reality, a moving picture of life. With the naturalness employed in the language, images which are familiar and free from the artificial metre, the folk songs presented in this novel create an alternative aesthetics.

Kalyana Rao's depiction of folk songs sung in Telugu speaking region and dance forms like Vidhi Bagavatham, Urumula Nrityam, reflect on the alternative form of dance in particularly, the lower strata of the society. Those folk-art forms are also natural and real. "In fact, Veedhi Bagotam is a great representation of the combination of song, music, dance and expression. A society. A culture. A living art of turning gods and goddesses into true village folk, of conversing and of performing amidst people without the obstructing curtains. (Rao 76). The village life is reflected in these folk-art forms, where villagers feel their lives woven in these songs. They also make the villagers participate in a wider sense as Arunabha Bose observes, "The Veedhi Bagotam and Chenchunatakam show the dissolution of the hierarchical spatial demarcation between the stage and the audience, the audience are no longer passive recipients of meaning but become active producers of meaning as well." (Bose), the people become the producers of meaning in the plays Yellanna performs. As Bose further stresses, "It becomes a communal performance and thus does not become dead like the written word but is alive, breathing and constantly being revived, reworked and renewed as people themselves add new songs and verses." (Bose). The example for the participatory nature of folk art is found when Subhadra watches her husband perform and becomes herself a part of that performance.

“Subhadra sat between Boodevi and Chinnammi and watched Yellanna's song and dance without blinking an eye. When they quarrelled saying, Adilatchmi, I'm going hunting and will be back,' she thought, Did he ever tell me anything like that when he went somewhere?” (Rao 72). When Yellanna performs, people participate in the play with their witty conversations. The chosen play for the depiction of participatory responses, Chenchulakshmi natakam, itself gets blended within the literary allusions of the novel, as in the play the protagonist leaves to the forest, Yellanna leaves his village Yennela Dinni and doesn't return. Yellanna re-enacts the aspect of travel in his own life as he migrates to several villages in Andhra Pradesh and teaches his folk songs to the people. Another aspect of folk art being participatory is, it is performed just in front of the people. It is not restricted to people visiting a temple, who can access the art. “Our jumping is only in front of crowds. Whether Bangarakka dances on the screen, whether Alisigadu tells jokes, whether Narasimhaswami is on the way out, it is all in front of the people.” (Rao 72). Folk art is accessible to the people. They can be connected not in the artificial literary sense. People participate in the artistic performance as the play depicts reality.

Kalyana Rao is equally distressed that; the folk art doesn't get equal recognition. “Just as the land they toiled on did not belong to them, why has this wide knowledge become so narrow as not to acknowledge that it is they who wove those songs that have survived? What is surprising is that there is no shame for being narrow-minded. This attitude rules the literary world proudly.” (Rao 42), the people become the art itself. They sing and dance naturally, never trying for recognition. “Nagannas and Yellannas did not go after recognition. Didn't dance to be known. Didn't sing. Art was in their veins. In their blood. In the depths of their hearts. In their very sweat.” (Rao 43). But everybody may not have the access to art. The folk art doesn't get flourished because

hunger dominates their lives. The abstract metaphors, melting words, linguistic ornamentations may not find place in the poetry of the marginalized people, as hunger ruptures their creative voice. Kalyana Rao takes the popular Telugu poems on the celebration of Krishna's childhood, where he steals the butter and milk from the houses of his neighbours, and his mother Yasoda listens to the musical complaints of those neighbours. But in the Mala household, the women don't have that much time left for such pleasurable indulgences. "In the houses of the malas and madigas of Yennela Dinni, no cream of milk was kept, no balls of butter." (Rao 64), no context for poetry is born as the hunger dominates the household. The novel questions the sources of the art, as the oppressed people in the village, don't have enough time left for contemplating on the sources of art, either from nature or from reading the works of the others. Hunger and the methods of meeting the hunger pangs, don't provide the environment for the art to be flourished. "The Yasodattha of Yennela Dinni would not sit at that time outside the threshold awaiting a beautiful, extremely dainty and tuneful complaint to be made. She would be cutting isukadeosaraku greens into the curry vessel. Otherwise she would be pulling out weeds in a field not her own. She would search the entire earth for a morsel of food for the moment." (Rao 64). In this context Kalyana Rao questions, the popular Telugu poets who composed the melodious songs on Krishna stealing food, receiving complaints from the neighbours, Yasoda his mother trying to punish him. These songs can be composed and appreciated by people who haven't experienced hunger. The novel shows Yellanna changing the lyrics in his later songs. "Till now happiness and contentment alone were the reasons for his singing. Where was the impetus for it? It was somewhere. All this was the search for it. Trees, hill, crow, koel, tears, perfumed water, hunger, field, fallow land . . . if he thought again . . . hunger, field, fallow land . . . and again . . . again field, fallow land,

hunger, self-respect . . . it stopped there.” (Rao 92) he thinks, he should change the songs to speak about the oppression. “At every corner it was confrontation that remained as history. If you pour all the words born from Manishadam” to Mahaprastanam's in a heap, what you find in that heap are just three words. Turmoil, agitation, revolt. That turmoil is art. That agitation is song. That revolt is dance.” (Rao 93) Kalyana Rao represents the voice of the suffering people. New songs make Yellanna to include war and turmoil in his artistic outpourings. He weaves songs about the struggle of Malas and Madigas in his village. His songs become the songs of the people, as people find themselves in those songs.

Kalyana Rao questions the very understanding of the knowledge systems. His observations on different skills people possess, makes him to re define the knowledge system. He presents the undivided line between knowledge and art as he questions the very nature of art, and asks what art is. Through his characters, he proposes art is very much visible in every activity which doesn't need certification. “To skin the animal's hide very skilfully, making it soft, to make pots with mud, stick and wood, to milk if there was enough milk, to churn butter, to melt it and make ghee,” (Rao 108), art is present in every activity, only the existed knowledge systems are considering these artistic activities as insignificant, is the idea the novel proposes. “...to extract oil from sesame, coconut, castor seeds, and wild dindiga plants, to spin cotton, to weave cloth, to hold the plough and to dig it straight into the earth and plough, to sow, to thresh grain, to scout for the place where there is water, to plant a stick to indicate the place and to find either drinking or salt water,” (Rao 108) The novel makes the readers to think about the existence of art and stresses on the need to appreciate the artistic activities in the environment around.

Subhadra finds her daughter-in-law Sasirekha through the migrating folk songs that her husband Yellanna composes.

Subhadra listens to the song, written by Yellanna, about her, which ends with the line 'Listen Subhadra', which makes her identify herself in Yellanna's memory. "The mouse drank the water under the roof. Listen

Listen Subhadra.

How will it rain at a cloudless place? Listen

Listen Subhadra. (Rao 121) In this way, the novel has many songs where natural and real experiences are presented with rich metaphors. The country life is chosen for these folk songs, as people can find their own lives blended in them. As Wordsworth proposes, country life gives a poet to explore the natural aspects of language, "because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." (Wordsworth), Yellanna's folk songs of the words like crops, corn fields, or the references to harvesting and paying taxes, leave a permanent impression among the people.

Yellanna's art is equally pleasing for the singer or the listener. "How many names he gave to the moonlight! Was it just one or two! Tender moonlight, full moonlight, ripe moonlight, flour moonlight—how many such names! Felt like laughing. Sometimes, he would give such a mischievous name and burst out laughing." (Rao 123). Yellanna's art is pure and natural, which is reflected through these metaphors, he particularly chooses moonlight, and its various shades, as in his understanding, the moonlight is something which is reachable at the same time, pleasing to the artist. What is more important is, how Yellanna defines the various shades of moonlight with the images which are reachable and perceptible. Yellanna's agitated heart equally moved by the

softer objects and images around him, and composed melodious songs. “How he said it!

*On the mattress of the sky On the cotton sheet
Subhadra, the starry flower bunch Subhadra,
you're truly a real coral.*

Mattress of the sky, cotton sheet, starry flower bunch. How would each one be? As if he would say what each one was for. Real coral. How did she appear to him then?” (Rao 123). As he can compose his love songs for his beloved Subhadra with the imagery of comparing her as a flower bunch, real coral, he finds the artistic pleasure around these images. Whether Subhadra or his audience comprehend these images or not, is secondary to his literary imagination. Yellanna's songs have revolutionary thoughts but are able to have concrete metaphors. “The dusky light was wearing its final smiles. It was of that light that Yellanna wove the song, 'Rabbit of dusky light Subhadra, Subhadra who passes through the field mounds.' He called it an old dusk. Awakening ray. The clenching dusky lips. The last stage of sprout- waves. The stream's heart wrench that caresses the speechless earth.” (Rao 132). Ruth is convinced that, weaving songs is greater than writing songs. Ruth thinks, it is difficult to write songs that would make people to be connected. “Folk culture has such maleness. Has such femaleness. There was such beauty that it would make one touch and get excited all over the body like that. That's why it became the folk. Beauty, expression, and weaving are the adornments that have stuck on to the folk so very naturally.” (Rao 184) presenting these folk songs of Telugu region, Kalyana Rao underlines the need to re-think about the dividing line between the urban and folk literary ventures. Kalyana Rao's novel could be read as an authentic source on finding about more nuances of Telugu folk tradition.

By creating a structure of folk aesthetics, Kalyana Rao gives voice to the myriad aspects of forgotten or underrepresented

stories. A folk song has a story in it, a moving character, a memorable conversation, a struggle, or a particular way of life where struggle is taken as a natural phenomenon. Kalyana Rao brings out all these nuances of folk songs in this novel, which could be read for understanding particularly Telugu folk poetics.

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