

Reformist Tradition: The Cultural Canvass of Gurajada Venkata Apparao's *Kanyasulkam*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to show, through its analysis/critique of the popular Telugu play *Kanyasulkam*, how a seemingly progressive, reformist literature can in reality have reactionary agenda/effect. Further, it argues that this trend and tendency is not an exception or isolated piece of literature but rather can be observed in the entire modern Indian literature. It also suggests a plausible reason for this: the Brahminical worldview of the author which does not allow him/her to embrace the progressive, enlightenment values. Thus, the modern Indian literature continues to play a regressive role in its final message and effect even while posing to have taken up the agenda of 'reform'.

Key Words: Reformation, Tradition, Modernity, Social play, Telugu literature, Casteism, Male-centrism.

Kanyasulkam written by Gurajada Vekata Apparao is the first modern Telegu play staged in 1892, later published in 1897, followed by a second and revised edition in 1909, is one of the rare plays in the history of Telugu literature which attained epic proportions. The play was so immensely popular that people learnt the dialogues by heart and quoted them on various occasions.

Gurujada Apparao (1861 - 1915) belonged to Vizianagaram region of Andhra and after his graduation he was employed by the Kings of Vijayanagaram where he served briefly as a lecturer in a college and later became chief advisor to the king. After the demise of the King, he served as the advisor to the Maharani of Rewa, the widowed sister of the late Maharaja. His journey as a writer began early in his life as a student when he wrote and published poetry. He was a well-acquainted man for his age, familiar with both Sanskrit and few European writings. His dairy even records his correspondence with George Bernard Shaw.

Apparao wrote in the late nineteenth century, a very important phase of socio-cultural transformation due to the colonial context where in the ideas of modernity and tradition were being reconceptualized across language traditions in India due to the impact of colonial modernity. In the preceding classical period Telugu literature was shaped by the strong influence of Sanskrit tradition. Often grand, verbose and modern Telegu literature broke with that tradition and began to adopt colloquial forms of expression, thus moving closer to average reading public. This was a very important and inevitable move as the reading public had diversified and were looking ahead for a new variety and form of writing which would encompass and represent their life and times in realistic terms.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam Panthulu considered to be the father of modern Telugu literature, heralded this movement. Being influenced by Brahma Samaj and an avid social reformist he intended to employ literature as a medium of social transformation. Appa Rao continued in a similar tradition using everyday dialects in his writing with motives of social transformation.

Modernism in Telugu literature is recognized as exhibiting certain features and interrelated trends. First among these is the critical interrogation and recasting of their cultural practices in response to colonial modernity which is popularly termed as 'reform'. Their ideas of tradition and modernity are formulated and later used to evaluate and comprehend native practices from Eurocentric-modernist gaze. Second is the change in the language use from *grandhik* (textual) to *vyavaharic* (colloquial), to represent the new forms of motifs and cultural practices required to deal with the changing circumstances including a new range of vocabulary and idioms essential to address the changing world. Third was the adaptation and development of new genres of literary expressions like prose, fiction and novel writing. Finally, using literature and aesthetic expressions as political and ideological mediums rather than as apolitical forms with a clear intent to influence society, both didactically and as political discourses. Venkata Apparao's writings imbued all these traits. In fact, he makes his intention to write the social play categorically clear in his preface to the first edition which he wrote in the year 1897:

Under the orders of His Highness the Maharajah of Vizianagaram a list was prepared ten years ago of Brahmin sulka marriages, celebrated in the ordinary tracts of the Vizagapatnam District during three years. The list is by no means exhaustive as the parties concerned were naturally averse to admitting acceptance of bride-money: but such as it is, it forms a document of great value and interest. The number of marriages recorded reached one thousand and thirty-four, giving an average of three hundred and forty-four for the year. Ninety-nine girls were married at the age of five years, forty-four at four, thirty-six at three, six at two and three at the age one; the babies in the last instance carrying a price of from three hundred and fifty to four hundred rupees a head. Strange as it may sound, bargains are sometimes struck for children in the womb. Such a scandalous state of things is a disgrace to society, and literature cannot have a higher function than to show up such practices and give currency to a high standard of moral ideas. Until reading habits prevail among the masses, one must look only to the stage to exert such healthy influence. These considerations prompted me to compose *Kanyasulkam*. (Apparao V)

Apparao's Telugu play *Kanyasulkam* has the distinction of being the first social play in Telugu, the first full length play to be written in prose form and the first to use colloquial Telugu. The word *Kanyasulkam* in translation would mean bride price, a dastardly practice of marrying (selling) young girls to older men for a price, a widely prevalent practice among Brahmins of Telugu region. The play handles multiple interrelated social issues like child marriage, widow marriage and the 'nautch question' along with its critique of bride-price practice.

'Nautch' is an anglicized form of Urdu word 'naach' meaning dance. The 'nautch girl' as an entertainer of men belonged to a unique class of courtesans who played a significant role in the social and cultural life of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But by the end of the nineteenth century, this class of dancers not only lost royal patronage but also fell into disrepute and began to be taken for prostitutes. The nautch question or more precisely, the anti-nautch movement gained momentum during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Between 1900 and 1920, thanks to the combined zeal of Christian missionaries and aware Hindus, the anti-nautch campaign was consolidated. (Vijayasree & T.Vijay Kumar 267)

The play *Kanyasulkam* represents the transitory phase of Telugu society grappling with the conflicting notions of tradition and colonial modernity and 'reforming' itself to the challenges of cultural interfaces. The rise of modern sensibilities in Telugu literature were influenced by colonial rule and the emerging sense of nationalism. The narrative revolves around the Telugu Brahmins and their practice of *Kanyasulkam* where a female child is married to an old man for a bride price and who inevitably attains widowhood and suffers the life of deprivation and misery. One such poignant incident is chronicled in the conversation:

GIRISAM: Listen. The truth is, when the boarding house woman was a mere toddler, it was decided to marry her off to a ripe old man. And even as he was tying the knot, or a moment later, that old man had croaked in the pandal. Then the dilemma was, whether she was married or not.... The purohit took a bribe from them and gave the evidence that the sacred thread was not tied. So, the case was lost, but after that no one married her again. (Apparao 13)

The character of Madhuravani is incorporated as the central character of the play (in the second edition). She is portrayed as a beautiful and intelligent 'nautch' woman, who has a role in creating as well as resolving the conflicts of the play. This intervention was meant to address the 'nautch' problem. The reformist fervor of Apparao as reflected in the play at times is complex and confusing. Scholars have identified certain ambivalence in his pursuit of reforms, though he was steadfast in his commitment to the issue he addressed. There is certain predicament in his comprehension of modernity and its implications, at time he appears to be suspicious, mocking, and confused over the process. Thus, if Butchamma represents the miserable plight of child widows, Girisam is portrayed as English speaking, pretentious and fake, whose reformist motives are self-serving. The author satirizes the reformist brigade led by people like Girisam for their dishonesty:

KARATAKA SASTRULU: What a comparison? One is a cur and the other a milch cow. Saujanyaarao is anti-nautch in thought, word and deed. If you just utter the word prostitute in his presence, he would warn you to mind your language. Gentlemen like him are rare. The others are anti-nautch when it is convenient. Most members of the anti-nautch brigade are heroes in words alone, and Girisam is foremost among them. Some of them are anti-nautch in the morning, pro-nautch in the night.

Some are anti-nautch in the hometown, and pro-nautch outside it. Some are pro-nautch as long as they are fit and anti-nautch once they get old. Some are pro-nautch as long as they are alive and anti-nautch after death. That means they perform rituals here in this world so that they can book their ticket to pleasures in the other world. Smaller fry like me, however, are anti-nautch whenever they have no access to dancing girls. (Apparao 208)

Colonial rule is generally seen as the conduit to the dissemination of modernity in India. The writing of this phase is often termed as “Renaissance” of Indian writing. The average perception of modernity is that ushered in a new era of openness and provided mobility. Scholars like Sanjay Subrahmanyam, David Shulman and Velcheru Narayana Rao have questioned this assumption in their *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India: 1600-1800* (2006). In fact, Velcheru Narayana Rao, who has also translated *Kanyasulkam* as *Girls for Sale* (2009), in his detailed after word titled “The Play in Context: A Second look at Apparao’s *Kanyasulkam*” has provided an in-depth analysis of the influence/presence of modernity even prior to the colonial conquest of India. Extensively quoting the Historian Sanjay Subramnaya, Velcheru states that from fifteenth to eighteenth century the world witnessed tremendous and unprecedented changes in South Asia along with regions which were in contact with South Asia. These changes were caused by various transactions like travel and trade between Europe, Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, which brought in a new secular and historical consciousness in Indian history, which according to Velcheru can be recognized as an early form of modernity, very different from the modernity disseminated during British rule in India.

The most important point that Velcheru Narayana Rao makes with reference to *Kanyasulkam* is that in the second edition of the play Apparao reorients his play to debunk and mock at the colonialist modernity of the British variant that was popular in Nineteenth century. Velcheru further notes that the writer who responded to the colonial modernist/reformist version of cultural, literary expression was Veeresalingam, though Apparao followed that reformist pattern at the beginning in his first version, but later retracted and became a critic of colonialist modernity. Though these debates might rage and continue with regard to Apparao and *Kanyasulkam*, the fact that the play is contextualized and represents certain important issues of that period is an indisputable fact.

The motive of reform in *Kanyasulkam* might have multiple reasons but the essential context was due to certain significant developments that occurred in that society. It was the period where efforts to educate women and envision a greater role for them in public sphere through modern education were being debated by the educated upper castes. Several articles, poems, short stories were written and published to educate the people on the evils of child marriage, and on the miserable conditions of the child widows.

The reformist zeal and debates were confined to a small section of upper-class Brahmins and to even smaller number of sanskritized non-brahmin shudra castes like Reddis, Kammas and Kapus. The so-called lower castes were insulated and had no role in these developments as majority of them were peasant castes among whom widow remarriage was not seen as a problem or taboo. Thus, the issues of reformation that *Kanyasulkam* articulated was confined more closely to Brahmin castes and reformation was essentially a process in which the Brahmins recast themselves and reconstructed their identities due to the interface of colonial modernity. There is an instance in the novel where the decadence of the Brahmins is articulated by the Head constable in the play:

HEAD CONSTABLE: If neither the one who paid the money, nor the one who married are bothered, why should we worry, uncle? Moreover, where is Brahmanism these days? Selling children to the old and illegitimate pregnancies have become so common everywhere. (Appa Rao 168)

In the words of Velcheru Narayana Rao “However, for this emerging new upper class, the lower castes did not exist. Convinced that their own caste was all that mattered in society, the leaders of the widow remarriage and anti-nautch movements gave their activities the high-sounding name of social reform, while actually it was only a small-scale caste reform” (166).

Thus, the play is an instance of a polyphonic text that engages with the notions of modernity and tradition, and offers a complex picture of the history of influences of the period.

Kanyasulkam represents a sharper and more incisive critique of traditional practices. It reflects the diversity of interests that composed the social context. The critique is also sensitive to the deeper historical

roots of modern change and bears the imprint of pre-British rumblings of disquiets and urges for change in the social context. It however does not completely transcend its social location. It projects the practice of a particular caste as a broader social practice and through the medium of criticism seeks renewal of caste based cultural control. The woman in this play is a multifaceted subject. She is simultaneously victim, critic and redeemer for the upper caste patriarchal system. However, the caste barrier in the social vision of the author restricts the possibilities for the woman. She symbolizes the need for male-centric and upper caste-centric reform.

The text has a common underlying thesis of symbolizing the woman for the regeneration of upper-caste male-centric dominance. The first and most obvious manifestation of this is the restricted social visions of the authors. In the case of *Kanyasulkam* the Brahminical worldview sets the boundaries of reform and woman is secondary, instrumental and symbolic for a male-centric and caste-restricted regenerative effort. Overall, these texts conform to the general trend in early modern Indian literature of reflecting the aspirations of upper caste men in the context of modernity. It reflects both their restricted social visions and also their largely successful cultural enterprise that subsumes the interests and experiences of a very diverse society under a hegemonic but hybrid cultural complex. The polarity between modernity and tradition served to realize the hybrid formation while the modality of reform served to package an upper caste interest as a general social cause.

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