

A Page Unexplained in Literary History: Saraswatibai Rajawade

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Abstract

Saraswatibai Rajawade wrote during the times when women's writing was snubbed as 'the literature of coriander and mustard'. She brought a new identity to women writers by not only writing about women's lives from novel perspectives but also by encouraging other women writers to do so. Strangely, however, her writings went into oblivion and found only a fleeting mention in the history of Kannada literature. When she was alive too, she chose to remain a silent onlooker who had given up creative writing due to her possessing inclination towards spirituality and renounced not only all pleasures of life, but writing too. While one finds enough, if not more, evidences for Rajawade's literary presence in the early and mid twentieth century, there is scarcely anything that explains her abrupt absence and reticence. Why did she renounce writing? Why did she detach herself from her literary persona as though it never existed? These and many such questions go unanswered. Neither does the writer explain adequately nor does the literary history of her times or later probe into the reasons for her exit from the literary horizon.

KEYWORDS: Saraswatibai Rajawade, reticent voice, women, twentieth century, obscure literary history, univocal history

The status of women in India is indivisibly linked with the wider social circumstance of the country that no endorsement of women's interests is possible without submitting to the varied socio-politico-cultural and religious issues of existence and survival. Also in India, a monolithic picture of women's position is difficult to provide due to the multiplicity and complexity of its cultures and traditions. Another serious difficulty is of locating reliable sources which can help construct a profile of 'Indian woman'. This problem has been foregrounded by viewing history – social and literary – from the subaltern and feminist perspective.

While on the one hand, myth tries to pigeonhole women in acceptable or objectionable images by emphasizing on stereotypical characteristics like chastity, sexual abstinence, self-control, sexual fidelity, and patience as marks of a 'woman', on the other, history records the past as seen by men, where women are largely ignored or given but a passing mention. Besides, historical documents that have been discovered and used by the 'mainstream' scholars tend to be discriminatory; historians who attempted to build up history, from the very beginning, only perpetuated the patriarchal stance towards women and thereby paid little attention to the role of women in history, except while referring to the exceptional women. Traditional scholars have effectively created the impression that women were greatly honoured in ancient India from Vedic times, enjoyed freedom, good status and learning opportunities, and that the decline in the woman's status was the result of later foreign invasions. In reality, however, feminist researches have ascertained

that the ancient times were as ambivalent and sexist as the recent times with regard to women's status in India.

Several polemical works written by women in the past stand testimony to the restrictive role society and religion played in the lives of women. Nevertheless, not all women's writing can be considered feminist. But the issues of gender and the place of women in literature are the most important aspects of feminist discourse. Since in the name of 'culture' and 'tradition', women have been conventionalized into their 'given' roles, to cognize and register one's 'real self' and not the 'given self' is to break through the very edifice of culture. This paper tries to read Saraswatibai Rajawade in these premises.

Saraswatibai Rajawade (1913-1994), described as "a cursed angel descended from heaven" (Subbanna, 9), wrote during the socio-political cataclysm of India in the twentieth century. Regarded as one of the forerunners of women writers in Kannada, she lived in the thick of traditions in the culturally rooted and tradition bound town of Udupi, in the then district of Mangalore in Coastal Karnataka.

Rajawade's life was one of hardships, experiments, intense attachments and renunciation. Born into dire poverty, she began to earn her living as a flower girl, as a house maid, and experienced the bleak side of life in all its intensity. Her extraordinary beauty brought her opportunities in theatre for a brief time and later in the world of silent films in Mumbai. After her stint in Hindi cinema, she toured the whole of India as a singer in an orchestra. After this rising graph of events came to a swift fall, she returned to her hometown, empty handed, and back to her poverty.

When Rajawade was fifteen, she was married to Ambikapati Raishastri Rajawade, a government officer of very high rank. He was a widower of 52 with affluence and position. Saraswati's life took a complete turn from penury to luxury with this marriage. It was when she was sixteen, as a married girl living in Singapore with her husband, she wrote her first story 'Nanna Ajnaana' (My Ignorance). She sent it to a magazine called 'Kanthirava' in Karnataka where it got published. Receiving appreciation from the renowned Kannada writer Manjeshwara Govinda Pai, she was encouraged to write more stories, articles, essays, poems and plays. Around 1929, Saraswatibai Rajawade began to write short stories with the pen name 'Giribale'.

In 1936, after her husband retired from service, Rajawade began to reside in Bangalore with him. She published and edited a magazine called 'Suprabhata', especially to address women's issues, through which she encouraged several writers like Anandi Sadashivarao. M.K. Jayalakshmi, Leelabai Kamat and others to write for the magazine. 'Giribale' has written 63 short stories in all. 'Ahuti Ityadi Kathegalu' (1938), 'Kadamba' (1947), and 'Prema Vivaha' (1945) are the three collections of her stories.

Considering the womanist concerns and relevance of Giribale's stories, she was called 'The Uncrowned Queen of (Kannada) Short Stories' by The Hindu (Bhat, xii). The stories of Giribale are woman-centric and were written at a time when stories that narrated the upheavals of woman's mind were a rarity. Her protagonists do not silently suffer the atrocities on them. Although in vain, they protest and rebel against the situation. During a time when woman's voice in India was more muffled than it is today, that Giribale articulated the inner recesses of her female characters' minds is laudable.

With her husband's demise in 1941, she returned to Udupi. It was when she was in Bangalore and Udupi that she actively engaged herself in writing innumerable short stories and essays with the pen name 'Giribale'. She grew to become a renowned and innovative writer of her time. Her writings were inspired by her life as well as the social reform movement in India.

When she had reached the pinnacle of fame as a writer, she seemed to have been gripped by a sense of dejection and disenchantment about all worldly activity. Consequently, she renounced everything including writing and built a temple for Sri Sharadamba at Chitpadi in Udupi. She utilized all her wealth for the temple, composed songs devoted to the Mother – turned into an ardent, reticent devotee from a sensitive and passionate writer.

Saraswatibai Rajawade's life stands testimony to the life of an average Hindu Woman of the twentieth century and her economic, social, familial and personal predicament. Her life reflects the colossal lack of autonomy and the manner in which she came over it initially through writing, and then through renunciation and tried to lead life her way.

While one finds enough, if not more, evidences for Rajawade's literary presence in the early and mid twentieth century, there is scarcely anything that explains her abrupt absence and reticence. Why did she renounce writing? Why did she detach herself from her literary persona as though it never existed? These and many such questions go unanswered. Neither does the writer explain adequately nor does the literary history of her times or later probe into the reasons for her exit from the literary horizon.

Narrating the innumerable incidences when she was deceived by people, both materially and emotionally, Rajawade says in her memoir,

“There are several such experiences. I feel like revealing it all in detail. But one should not exhume the body that is buried. What is the use of voicing the past?

Look, our society is not open-minded. In my view, by nature the human society is immature. Therefore, people like me should zip up my lips and vanish when my end approaches. That is the best and the safest in all ways.” (Vaidehi, 59)

Here is an obscure critique of her society by a writer that needs to be heard and calls for interpretation. Unfortunately, the literary history ignored this 'small voice' of a woman writer for long probably because, as Ranajit Guha observes in the context of the Telengana movement, “the writing of history (whether political or literary) conforms fully to patriarchy” (315). In his advocacy for the need to “cultivate the disposition to hear these (small) voices and interact with them” (Guha, 307), Guha recognizes the potential complexities of their stories that are eager to be heard. He foregrounds the possibility of lending a ear to the suggestive and frugal expression by women to fathom their “undertones of harassment...pain... (and) disappointment” (313). Guha hypothesizes, although in a different context of the Telangana Movement, the scenario where history is rewritten incorporating the narratives of the small voices. He observes that such a re-writing of history would not only ‘challenge the univocity of statist discourse’ but “will activate and make audible the other small voices as well” (315).

Nevertheless, Rajawade is not to be mistaken for a vulnerable, frail voice. She is rather a voice to reckon with in the literary scenario of the twentieth century. Yet, in the situation of Rajawade, the sense of disillusionment, betrayal and helplessness of a woman writer seem to have got subsumed in the patriarchal canon of literary texts and

personalities. An unraveling of this muffled voice could expose several vested interests of the society making the elusive voice of the woman a potent agency to uproot the 'system' laying bare its hypocritical and univocal foundations.

'Literature' which was for too long a time, a male bastion, after the 1970s began to see the uninhibited use of terms and metaphors from the kitchen, the labour room, child birth, about menstruation, about the harem and about everything that women engaged themselves in and was part of their being. This kind of an alternative writing "marched into the sacred spaces of literature, making for a revolution that drew its strength from that other force for progressive social change – feminism" (Joseph 2003, 5). They have brought about change in the conditions in which they write and in which they are read and written about. For several decades, even now with the exception to those writers who have come to be regarded as 'serious writers', women's writing had been scoffed as mere 'kitchen literature' filled with personal and insignificant matter sans vitality and profundity.

Saraswatibai Rajawade too wrote during the times when women's writing was snubbed as 'the literature of coriander and mustard'. However, she brought a new identity to women writers by not only writing about women's lives from novel perspectives but also encouraged other women writers to do so. When India was still opaque to the idea of equality between man and woman, she wrote stories and poems exhorting the readers to understand the need for such equality for a healthy society.

In India, women never seemed to have taken up writing with the desire to attain fame or recognition. In most cases, the urge to write, to express, remained dormant and groping for several initial years of their life; but found direction gradually. For many the cause for their inclination towards writing was loneliness and alienation. They were without companions to share their thoughts or feelings. Some of them were the first to be educated in their families, and with a lot of struggle with family and community to achieve it. They persistently suffered the weight of both blatant and clandestine restrictions clamped on them that left them crippled, curtailed and wingless. The emotional turbulence and the physical and mental anguish they endured as a result of such restrictions, they found, were stifling and sickening. Unable to find concrete ways to protest and fight the confines around them, unable to contain the surging thoughts of insurgency and counter action, many women writers claim to have chosen the pen as a weapon for survival, as a mark of defiance.

Indian women writers generally focus on personal experiences through which they talk about gender oppression within their community, about the dynamics of man-woman relationship in family and in society at large. This inclination of women writers towards the domestic and the personal is often the source of criticism against them and their work. But most of the writers feel that they should and can write only about experiences that have touched them personally in a direct or indirect manner. This, they feel, should explain why their writing is largely on domestic themes. Moreover, women writers in India are cognizant of the fact that the 'domestic' and the 'personal' are no more innocent and simplistic in their import but are comments and treatises on society.

During a period when women in India had no awareness that they had a personality of their own, and when men believed that women didn't deserve to have an independent existence, Saraswatibai Rajawade established herself in the world of

Kannada literature. She came to be called “the uncrowned queen of short stories”. Strangely, however, her writings went into oblivion and found only a fleeting mention in the history of Kannada literature. When she was alive too, she chose to remain a silent onlooker who had given up creative writing due to her possessing inclination towards spirituality and renounced not only all pleasures of life, but writing too.

Saraswatibai Rajawade wrote during the time when Masti Venkatesha Iyengar and Dr. Shivarama Karanth had begun to enrich Kannada literature with a new wave of creativity. While these men grew to become great writers, Rajawade, despite having the potential to grow into one herself, chose to abstain from writing. “Anyone who would take up the study of the history of women’s literature in Kannada, should first engage in an enquiry into the reasons for Rajawade’s self-inflicted retirement from writing, and the possible socio-familial causes that led to it” (Mahishi and Nagaraj, 1994). Rajawade led such an eventful and vibrant life that without much intervention if she had just penned down the pages of her life it would serve as a rich repertoire of lived experiences. More significantly, her enigmatic exit from the literary scene could be a pointer to the stifling conditions and circumstances surrounding the women of the twentieth century. In that sense, to explore the possibilities of the reasons for her departure would result in a rewriting of the history of her times.

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