



**TRANSLATING THE PAST: A READING OF THE CRITICAL
DISCOURSES OF KANNADA NAVODAYA WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO MASTI VENKATESH IYENGAR AND A.R. KRISHNA
SHASTRI**

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ABSTRACT

Kannada Navodaya-A literary movement of the late 19th century and early 20th century negotiated with its cultural and literary pasts and the colonial present. Navodaya Writers took upon themselves to methodically represent their past by collecting and reviewing the literature of the bygone era. This helped to create a canon and history for Kannada literature. The paper attempts to examine some interesting episodes of “translating the past” in the critical discourses of Kannada Navodaya. The paper looks at translation as a metaphor through which critics re-construct ,identify and derive the past from diverse social contexts and origins. This process foregrounds the experience of the colonized in forging a new literary identity by consolidating different forms of literature. At the same time it also uncovers the politics of ideology and culture which are an integral part of these discourses. The paper uses A R Krishnashastri's preface to Katamrita (Stories from Kataritasagara) and Masti Venkatesh Iyengar “vimarshe”-a collection of reviews written in Kannada on the works of renowned authors as well as poetic works of Vaishnava saints, folk music of Karnataka as its corpus to examine the same.

Key words: cultural pasts, translating the past, ideology and culture, colonized

INTRODUCTION

A.R.krishnashastri in his “Katamrita”narrates a story from “Brihatkatha Manjari” written by Goodarapalli Hari Ramashastri.The story goes like this...King Vikramaditya- of Ujjaini wins over a betaal and defeats the queen of Manipuri –Padmavathi.He takes her along with her sisters Kalavathi, Bhagirathi and Leelavathi to Ujjaini. He marries all of them. However they resist Vikramaditya by keeping quiet and drawing curtains between them and him. And both parties- the colonizing husband and colonized wives enter an agreement. Accordingly they promise to accept the defeat if silence is broken thrice. Vikramaditya makes use of betaala's story telling skills.Betaal narrates mesmerizing stories but without a closure. This makes them break silence and plead for closure. This story of resisting wives and “won over” betaal in many ways tell us the story of *Kannada* Navodaya and its native intellectuals.L.S.Sheshagiri Rao in his book '*Hosagannada saahithya charithre*' points out that for about 50 years from 1823-1873 ,no important literary work was produced in kannada literature.(after 1823's “Mudra Manjusha “by Kempu Narayana)



And he considers the 1921 poetic experiment of B.M.Shrikantaih,"English Geethegalu" (translation of 14 English poems) as one of the most important inaugural moments of Kannada Navodaya. But how do we account for the 50 years silence in the Kannada literary world? How did the writers of the subsequent generation build their past? What kind of textual choices they made? Or sources they picked? The paper tries to find answers to these questions. When betaal narrated the stories he took the form of animals and plants and flowers...He made the story irresistible and absurd for the audience only to break the silence.

However in the story narrated by A.R.Krishnashastri, there are no details of the ways in which story was told and the strategies employed by the teller to break silence. The texts chosen for the paper are critical discourses written by Masti Venkatesh Iyengar and A R Krishna Shastrri in the year 1926 and 1952 respectively. The term post-colonial is used to capture everything that happens after the colonial intervention. Post-colonial studies has given us a language to describe and understand the complex power relationship of the colonised with the colonizer and their attempts to define themselves and shape their histories.Howeverthe idea that colonizer remained "other" and a victim of the coloniser's hegemony seems to undermine the agency of the colonized. On the other hand, Translation Studies has moved on from its initial preoccupations of "faithful to the source" or 'loss' to an inquiry of the underlying power relationships in any intercultural encounter.

Translation "Carries across" a text from one context to another and involves the "transformation" of that source into something other and a text that can be read by a completely new set of readers in another time and another place.(Bassnet,2009)The paper examines an intra-cultural translation of the past to build a history for itself.Kannada Navodaya critics negotiated with the past and felt the need to translate them in the present to nourish literature. Most writers derived inspiration from western writers but were wise enough to nativise and creatively subvert the colonizer's cultural domination.

Therefore the paper looks at "translation" figuratively to mean a textual journey from one source to another. This involves a translating of the past to the contemporary readers. Thepaper endorses the view that critics or the translators are no "Unaligned filters" (Bassnet, 2009) but actively construct, identify and derive the past from diverse social contexts and origins.

The colonized wives/reluctant literary world of *Kannada* literature however had its own unheard, forgotten and undocumented literary culture-oral traditions and rich Sanskrit literature. In The paper will look in to the essay 'Ballad forms of Karnataka'. Masti documents his experience of meeting "Jogis"- wandering devotees who sang ballads in praise of God.Interstingly Masti confesses that the importance attached to ballad form in English literary history inspired him to compile the local ballad forms.A peep into colonizer's cultural expression quite paradoxically works differently on the postcolonial consciousness. Evidences of such sort suggest that the cultural hegemony may not be as powerful as it has been credited after all. However the text demonstrates how the act of translating one cultural expression in to another can also carry



ideological baggage. Forinstance, Masti discusses a song that the woman sings after much persuasion in Telugu. The song goes like this..

Her house is on the hillock,

Blind is her husband

Let's cross the hillock

Without letting him know

Come...Lovely little devil (Muddula gumma)

The women hesitated to sin due to its theme of promiscuity.. Masti quickly adds that it resembles the relationship between Krishna and gopikas. While translating an oral tradition to enrich written literature, Masti is cautious enough to sanitize promiscuity by coloring it sacred. Then he moves on to Kannada ballad forms found in *Mysore* and *Malenad*. One of the ballads begins like this.

Come Rangappa...You are Rangappa Nayaka

What do you say at this moment?

All the important persons of the village like Vire Gowda, Vastare Halige Gowda have gathered for a meeting.They also invite Rangappa Nayaka.Then they all decide to refuse to pay tax and not to go to Mysore.and they also come up with an idea to trap tax officer with the help of a prostitute in the village.Later Masti finds out in the Mysore gazette that there existed a Rebel leader by name Rangappa Nayaka and there indeed was a rebellion against Mummudi KrishnaRaja Odeyar.Ballads also deal with themes like marital discord between old man and young wife. Early 20th century was an age of transition in terms of caste, social order and politics. Ballad singers express their discontent over the loss of order and hierarchy in the society. In those days a ballad singer recalls “we would stop near Gowda house first and sing. In return they would be very generous in giving away food to us, but now everyone thinks they are the “Gowda” and they want us to sing in front of their house first!(79).Masti remarks “a poisonous element has entered every aspect of our society. It has destroyed the old system and has been blocking the new system to shape up” (80).The poisonous element has also brought in secular ideas that may result in the loss of order. Masti seems to be disturbed by the loss.

Masti identifies that Ballads not only informally re-tell histories but also are instructive in nature. In the discourse, Masti redefines the idea of poetry and poet. A poem is a life's natural flower. Young poets are advised to discover tone,melody and beauty found in folk music and provide an expression to them.A colonizer may try to putdown “others” culture but response to the same is varied. In times of cultural crisis there are moments of self-assertion and expansion of the idea of literature to accommodate oral tradition.

A.R.Krishna Shastri is a prominent writer, researcher and translator of *Kannada* literature.He has remained popular through his '*VachanaBharatha*' a re-telling of Mahabharata. He was instrumental in creating canon for Kannada literature asan editor of "*Prabhudha Karnataka*" published by Mysore University. The paper examines his preface to "*Katamrita*" –a translation of stories and fables from katasarithasagara.



A 43 page elaborate preface discusses the ambiguity pertaining to source text and the different versions available in English. He translates the same into Kannada to help women readers who finish reading novels in a day's time and stretch hands for another. The Novel form was quite new to *Kannada* literary culture but story telling was not. A.R.Krishna Shastri notes that even animals, servants, king, queen tell stories at the drop of the hat in Kathasaritha sagara. The preface is a well-researched incisive analysis of different versions and source texts.

However what catches attention was his choice of these texts for translation was not just to enrich target literature but also to provide a morally correct option for consumption.

He says,

“Whatever might be the merits of women-education but the creation of interest in reading swallows up all its demerits. Many people are taking advantage of the situation and writing different kinds of books. However if one is fully educated and wise they will retain their wisdom” (Shastri, Krishna AR, 1952)

This is an attack on the new generation of writers and novelists who were explicit about sexuality and human relationships. As Rahmat Tarikere in his “Kannada sahithya Vagvadagalu” notes reading novels in the early 20th century was considered equivalent to “going to Naach –game” and there used to be advertisements cautioning pregnant women to not read novels. The value judgments that A R krishnashastri pass in a polite and subtle manner and the act of providing an alternative to novel readers can be seen as an orchestration of patriarchal values in guiding the lesser human beings on what to choose.

The source Sanskrit text carries the value baggage which must be carried across to the target text and culture. He enumerates the kind of characters found in the text: witches like Dakini, maatagaati, promiscuous aggressive mothers-in-law and wife, jealous mistress, prostitutes, step – mothers and stupid women. The critic justifies the existence of such women in real world gives the example of Abraham Lincoln's wife who poured hot tea on his face in front of his friends .and then remarks if America's president himself was in such a state ,then how about common people. He quotes from Sanskrit writers to justify the same. And finally advises women to behave properly and create a new katarithasagara..The question remains whether this patriarchal mindset gets uncovered in the process of translating a culture or translation provides an access the consciousness of writer.

However A.R.krishnashastri famously described as “Kannada Senani” for his contribution to literature by Ha.Ma.Nayak did tell many stories to break silence of reluctant Kannadaliterature. The resisting colonized wives in the story did the right thing by responding to the betaala's mesmerizing stories. They can “voice” now, can negotiate now.

CONCLUSION

Hence this process of translating the past uncovers the native intellectual's attempt to sanitize the explicit contents of the folk form , the innate desire not only to enrich literature by finding a continuum with the past and attempting to re-tell the stories with a mission to provide moral



instruction to women readers. These discourses are a dialogue of the values of the early 20th century with the values of the past. They successfully broke the silence of the literary world.

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