

WOMEN'S WRITING: CREATING A SPACE FOR THEMSELVES

"We had a game in our house called "setting the table"... Forks to the left of the plate, knives and spoons to the rightWhen a knife or a fork dropped to the floor, that meant a man was unexpectedly coming to dinner. A falling spoon announced the surprise arrival of a female guest. No matter that these visitors never arrived on cue. I had learned a rule of gender identification. Men were straight-edged, sharply pronged and formidable. Women were softly curved and held the food in a rounded well."¹

- Susan Brownmiller

This chapter introduces some of the issues that need to be discussed in the light of women's writing. It introduces literary movements and the place given to women and their writing in the context of these movements. Then it examines how the histories of literature marginalize writing by women.

It is not out of place to state that the woman's body is a site of embarrassment, oppression, pain, destruction and disgrace in a male dominated society. But, at the same time it is also a site that initiates resistance. In other words, one can say that women's bodies are women's identities. The complex relationship between a woman, her body, the prescribed social norms, the language that inscribes and represents these norms in societies and literatures remains problematic and crucial. Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous emphasize that.

women historically limited to being sexual objects for men (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they can do this, and if they can speak about it in the new language it calls for, they will establish a point of view (a site *of difference*) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice.²

Resistance by women takes various forms of expression and comes up in their lives and in societal productions like art, literature, speech, and different modes of popular culture. Women's poetry is one of them. Consequently, poetry becomes important not only as an art form but also as a form that provides space for resistance. Therefore, in this dissertation I have considered contemporary poetry by women to locate issues of gender, patriarchy and their resistance of patriarchy. This research is a humble attempt towards understanding the subtleties of oppression and the gendered relationships bestowed on women in today's society.

The twenties to the early fifties of the twentieth century was a period of reformist movements. During this period, women's writing was prominently seen in Kannada, Hindi and many other Indian languages. Women edited and published magazines, which carried articles by women containing creative writing as well as discussions of issues related to women. Francesca Orsini, who maps the success of Hindi in creating a regional public sphere in north India, observes that women's journals and literature were also crucial in raising questions about the family and

about women's status in the family from new angles. Most importantly, **they** argued for the need to acknowledge individual emotions as well as duties, something that received a great deal of attention in the new genre of social novels.³ An ideal 'Indian womanhood' always represents the duties of a loyal wife, caring mother, supportive sister, etc. Obedient daughters were celebrated in literature while the self-assured were relegated to the margins of culture. Women writers of the period highlighted the importance of women in family and in society. In the process, as they brought out the problems faced by women to the forefront, women writers constructed the notion of a "new woman". Their writings and ideas are available in the literatures and magazines written and edited by women during that period. They reveal certain important aspects regarding new kinds of subjectivities constructed by women. These subjectivities were composed of special qualities like courage, boldness, patriotism and dedication to the nation as concerned citizens. Women moulded new subjectivities for themselves through their writings. This was very important for them, as it gave them an opportunity to represent themselves as citizens of a new spiritually strong nation. The 'ideal Indian woman', in turn, represented this spiritual strength. The concept of '*Arya Mahila*' the Aryan woman, portrayed by Tirumalamba in Kannada and Mahadevi Verma in Hindi, talked about the notion of the self-dependent strong woman dedicated to her tradition yet not simply a shadow of the man. Women's writing can be read as a resistance narrative shaped under the prevailing patriarchies. Women writers aware of the plight of women in the society raised their voices against injustice. They were active in the social and literary realms.

The late twenties to early sixties was a period when women's writing came up significantly. This was the period when magazines like *'Karnataka Nandini'*, *'Sanmaargadarshini'*, *'Veeramalhe'*, *'Saraswathi'*, etc., in Kannada and *'Grihalakshmi'*, *'Streedarpan'*, *'Chand'*, in Hindi, edited by women writers became popular. In Kannada, literary works that centred round the problems of women and argued for women's education were extensively produced. But male writers disagreed with the ideas propagated by women writers and women resisted the arguments put forth by men regarding their writings. In an article written in the 1920s, Tirumalamba clearly states that men had "incomplete knowledge about natural structure and character of woman's mind"⁴. She criticizes male writers for their opinions regarding women's progress and pitfalls.

Women writers attempted to make their voice heard in the public sphere through their writings. They participated in literary conferences and spoke for women in public. For example, Smt Gauradevi Inchalmutt presided over the women's session at the Kannada Literary Conference held in Gulbarga in 1949.⁵ In her presidential address she compared the state of her contemporary women to the women of the *vedic* age and observed that 'there was a sharp decline in literary pursuits due to the changed status of women's education'. Women writers were aware that gender was a social construction and this is reflected in their literature as well. They never considered literature as an entity independent from society.

Literary History and the Women Writers

Many critics have observed that the Modernist movement in the European literary tradition was "male centred" and "patriarchal" in its orientations. In "Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality", Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that.

A number of male modernists react against the voices of evil, they associate with a contaminating **feminisation** of culture, for they fear that "the whole generation **is** womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age.""

Few women writers have been included in the high modernist canon. The modernist movement that set certain standards of 'excellence' for others in creative writing in terms of style, form and language has successfully excluded women from the literary realm. A similar "masculine" trend is traceable in the modernist literary movement in other Indian literatures (despite the obvious difference in contexts and assimilations). The Modernist poetry that preceded contemporary women's poetry of the post nineteen eighties, believed that with its specific qualities and special use of language, literature has a unique ability to express the knowledge given by other disciplines in its own way.

The '*Navya*' or the modernist movement, of the late sixties in Kannada too was highly patriarchal. Influenced by the literary modernism of the European literary tradition, *Navya* emerged in a very big way in Kannada. *Navya*, a highly self-centred

literary movement emphasized on the complex literary expressions of the intricate personal experiences of the writer. *Navya* poetry is overloaded with themes of disillusionment, alienation and pessimism about modernity. It naturally did not have many woman writers in it, as the realities dealt with by the women writers were different. They mostly continued to write novels and short stories during this period.

Literature enjoyed the highest status during the modernist era which no other discipline had till then occupied in the Kannada socio-political scenario. The modernist phase was the most popular literary phase in both Kannada (*Navya*) and in Hindi (*Prayogvaad*, *Nayi Kavitha* and *A-Kavitha*). The main thrust of the Modernist poetry in Kannada and Hindi is similar. Both considered literature as something special and autonomous. Literary modernism ruled the intellectual scene with an imperialistic approach and embodied experiences of the male world. The modernist writers enjoyed a unique status in the socio-political realms of the society. It represented a different ideology, which also marginalized women's questions. Male writers moulded language, imagery and presentation to suit their expression and marginalized the social questions raised by various writers, including women, in their texts dominated the poetry scene especially during this period. The established critics in Kannada, for whom issues related to women were of no great significance, did not consider women's writing as serious writing but criticized women for their inability to write 'good poetry'. Modernism politically celebrated liberal democracy. It stood for 'high culture' as proposed by Eliot, Pound, and Leavis. Modernism also highlighted the individualistic experience of the middle-class male and the aspirations and ideologies of the Indian educated middle class. This research further examines the

forms of resistance offered by **the** post eighties women's **writing in Kannada and** Hindi to the preceding modernist, patriarchal movements.

After the eighties, the social situation in India began to change. Various literary movements like the *Bandaya*, *Dalita*, *Yuva Kavita*, *Janwadi Kavita* began to emerge. The oppressed groups like women and Muslims started writing. Questions of patriarchies and gender discrimination began to be prominently raised in women's poetry and started deviating from the mainstream after *Navya* and *Nayi Kavitha*.

The *Bandaya* (The Rebel) and the *Dalita* (The Oppressed) movements followed the *Navya* in Kannada. Writers who initiated these two movements in Kannada focused on women's issues in their writings as one of the issues addressed during the period. However, here the class and caste always prioritised gender. Though writings by women received sufficient attention these movements did not specifically focus on women poets. From the late eighties, women poets in Kannada are seen prominently voicing the issues related to gender discrimination and patriarchies. Sa. Usha, Pratibha, M R Kamala and H L Pushpa are a few poets to name.

In the case of Hindi, the *Prayogvaad* or the Experimentalist poetry movement started by Ajney had two women poets, Shakunta Mathur and **Kirithi** Choudhary. But they did not have a separate identity. *Nayi Kavitha* (the New Poetry) was a further development of *Prayog Vaad*. The *A-Kavitha* movement that criticised the class/ hierarchical social structure followed this. The poetry of

this **period** highlighted the life of the economically poor and the marginalised. This **movement** had a highly pessimistic attitude towards life. Mona Gulati is the only woman poet associated with this movement. Anger, disillusionment and an intense longing for death are some of the special elements of the short-lived *A-Kavitha* movement. This was followed by the *Naxalwadi* armed struggle of 1967 giving birth to the *Yuva Kaviha* (poetry by the new generation) movement. This movement enabled the marginalization of modernist trends. In the early eighties, with the leftist tendencies of the *Yuva Kaviha*, poets started writing with a democratic spirit, which in turn gave birth to the *Janwadi Kaviha* (Poetry of the Masses) movement. Several women poets associated with this movement and later influenced by the feminist movements have been constantly demanding for identification separate from the mainstream. Katyayini, Anamika, Sumathi Ayar, and Archana Verma are a few among them.

Women raised questions in relation to their subjectivities being constructed and portrayed by the dominant groups. **Though** the changes that appear have to be read in relation to Indian Nationalism and the developments that followed in the later years, we need to note that this is the time when the representation of identities emerged in a significantly definite way. This is a period when various social groups such as women, *dalit*, linguistic and religious minorities were questioning the all-pervasive notion of Indian Nationalism in literature. It was against this background that various oppressed identities and literary movements like the *Bandaya*, *Dalila*, *Yuva Kavita*, *Janwadi Kavita*, women's writing, Muslim writing, etc., emerged predominantly as new trends in Kannada and Hindi.

Literary Histories: The Marginalizing Gestures

In this part of the chapter I shall attempt to show how literary Histories written by men have failed to recognize women writers' contribution to literature. In his essay on Modern Kannada Literature and the Common People, D.R.Nagaraj talks about how the concerns of modern Kannada literature are drawn from the upper caste apprehensions and thus the plight of the common people remains as a mere sympathy. He points out:

Most scholars of Navodaya literature perceived the common man's reality i.e. poverty, to be the everlasting truth. Such a perception may invoke sympathy about the common man's state of affairs. They never realized the paradoxical extremities of advocating oneness of humanity to a society based on inequality.⁸

The category of common man for whom he argues precisely excludes women. It is an argument for the lower caste, economically backward but obviously for the men belonging to these categories.

Another important critic Kirthinatha Kurthakoti's work on the History of Modern Kannada Literature⁴ has one whole chapter dealing with the emergence of modern Kannada poetry in the late nineteenth century. He starts with the form '*Bhavageete*\ the lyric, its development in Kannada and moves on to say how the new form of poetry silently emerged in Kannada and later appeared in its full form in B.M.Srikanthaiah's '*English Geethegalu*'TM. Then he moves on to mention certain important literary establishments like the '*Geleyara Gumpu*'^u in Dharwad that led to the flourishing of Kannada poetry. He also talks of '*Taliru*' and '*Kiriya*

*Kaanike*¹², two important anthologies of poetry published in Mysore. The chapter carries a lengthy discussion on the poetry of Bendre, K.V. Puttappa and K.S.Narasimha Swamy. He discusses romantic poetry as well as writings by progressive writers. This is followed by Kurthakoti's discussion on modernist poetry wherein poems by Gopalakrishna Adiga take the forefront. Here he mentions the names of various other poets, renowned and less known and their contributions to Kannada poetry. This Chapter on 'Kannada Poetry' that runs for about 75 pages, i.e., pages 51 to 125, nowhere mentions even a single woman poet at any point. The contribution of women to Kannada poetry scenario is completely ignored and kept in the dark. The reason for this is made clear in his other book, '*Nuuru Mara Nuuru Swara*' (A Hundred Trees, A Hundred Voices) published in 1998. '*Nuuru Mara Nuuru Swara*'¹³ is Kirthinatha Kurthkoti's another voluminous book comprising of sixty articles on various aspects of Kannada literature. It has a two-page article on "Literature and Feminism". The author believes in the dichotomy of qualities attributed for men and women. *Purusha* (man) - *Paurusha* (the valor) vs *Sthree* (woman) - *Sthairya* (the patience). His analysis works within this traditional framework that ascribes set qualities for men and women. In this article though he agrees that there are umpteen numbers of women writing in Kannada, he points out that -

The basis of truth now is its machoism. If it has to be the basis of tolerance, history will have to change. It really makes sense only when women do something men cannot.

According to Kurtakoti at this point of time where history is associated with men and their valour it is impossible for women writers to make their point. Though he agrees that there is an attempt by women to write his preconceived notions

regarding their capabilities holds him from considering their writings as important.

The 1999's special issue of the Kannada magazine. •*Prajaavaani*•, carried an article on "Women's Poetry in Kannada"¹⁵ written by G.S.Amur, a well-known Kannada critic. This article gives sufficient details about how male critics directly associate femininity with poetry by women. Amur has demonstrated how the expectations of male critics direct the mode of women's poetry. According to him influenced by such expectations women poets tend to exaggerate their femininity and have ended up writing "bad poetry". Though he does not mention anything in particular, for Amur there are certain "bad" elements in women's poetry. Later in 2001, he writes an elaborate essay on '*Modern Kannada Poetry*', in his book in English titled '*Essays on Modern Kannada Literature*', published by Karnataka Sahithya Academi in 2001. Here, Amur reserves one single line at the end of the article to mention poetry by women in Kannada and it says.

Another post Navya development is the emergence of women's literature which is related to other protest movements. This movement has produced some fine poets...

He concludes his statement on women's poetry by listing a few names of contemporary women poets. This attitude of male critics is an example of how women's poetry in Kannada is considered as something not worthy of discussion by the scholars of the History of Kannada Literature and how they marginalize women's poetry by considering it simply as a product of one more protest movement. Thus poetry by women is seen and is set against mainstream poetry comprising of only male poets whose poems are represented as 'the Kannada

Poetry'. When it comes to the writing of the History of Literature to be published by the distinguished intermediaries like Sahitya Academi the women poets get censored. What is projected to non-Kannadiga readers in the form of literary history says nothing about the vibrant women's expressions in modern Kannada poetry.

The literary scene in Hindi is **not very** different. In Hindi, '*Kavita Ki Sangat*¹⁹', a highly acclaimed critical volume by Vijay Kumar published in 1995 does not recognize even a single woman poet. The critic has written a special chapter on Hindi poetry of the eighties. This is a period where women's poetry takes a different trajectory and voices itself in a major way. But the author remains silent over such a vibrant new development in Hindi language. Likewise, '*Hindi Saahitya Ka Doosara Itihas*²¹' (A Second History of Hindi Literature), by Bachchan Singh published in 1996 has a special chapter on contemporary poetry titled, '*Audhuniktavaad aur Navya Pragativaad (Janvaad)*' (Modernist and New Progressive Movements) wherein he discusses the poems by Leeladhar **Jagori**, Chandrakanth Devtale, Binodkumar Shukl. Kumar Vikal, Arun Kamal, Manglsh Dabral, Ashok Vajpeyee, Uday Prakash, etc., at length and mentions many other men writing poetry. Not a single woman poet gets mentioned in this chapter. As a response to such indifference shown towards women writing, Suman Raaje writes a book titled '*Hindi Sahitya Ka Aadha Itihas*²²' (The Other half of the History of Hindi Literature), published in 2003, in which she discusses exclusively women's writing at length. Suman Raaje in her article on -Contemporary Women's Poetry²⁰ specifically mentions that great critics in Hindi, writing on contemporary poetry like Vishvaambar Naath Upadhyay and Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari and others

have never considered poetry by women important. She points out that if the critics think that the poetry by women is limited and not up to the mark, they should consider the poems at least to prove this instead of ignoring.

Literary histories in Kannada and Hindi have seen women's writing as a homogenous category and thereby have failed to recognize the existing diversities. Women's relationship with men, other women and their immediate surroundings vary due to various reasons. Their caste/class background and regional identities that come up in their writings remain unnoticed. Without taking all these into consideration, literature by women are simply seen as one category that could be granted the last few pages in a literary history. Rewriting histories and rethinking about women's writing becomes an important engagement in the post eighties.

¹ Susan Brownmiller. *Femininity*. New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1984, p. 13

² As noted by Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the body: towards an understanding of lecriture feminine', in Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt. eds. *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*. New York: Methuen. 1985. p. 87

For more details regarding the Hindi scenario see Hranseca Orsini. *The Hindi Public Sphere-192-1940. Language and Literature in the age of Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 243 - 308

⁴ Sheshagirirao, L.S., ed. *Srimathi Nanjanagudu Tirumalamha Jeevana Mathu Sahitya*. Bangalore: IBH Prakashana. 1987 p. 32

⁵ Smt Gauradevi Inchalmut's presidential address was published in 'Saraswathi', a Kannada magazine edited by R. Kalyanamma. Vol.28, Issue.5, May 1949.

" Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. 'Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language. Sexuality', in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds. *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.. 1989, p. 83

⁷ 'Navya' or the literary modernism ruled the intellectual scene with an imperialistic approach and embodied experiences catering to the male world. Individual seems to be the center of expression and concern about serious threat to individuality was the central theme. The poetry scene especially during this period was dominated by men.

⁸ D.R. Nagaraj. "Aadhunika Kannada Saahithya matthu Saamaanya Manushya", in Nagaraj, D.R. *Amrutha Matthu Garuda* - A collection of Critical essays on Modern Kannada Literature. Bangalore: Directorate of Kannada and Culture. 1990. p. 42

⁹ Kirthinath Kurthakoti. *Yugadharmha haagu Sahithya Darshana*. Essays on history of Modern Kannada Literature. Dharwad: Manohara Granthamale, 1991

" B.M.Sreekanthaiah's introduced a new form of poetry to Kannada literature through his anthology of poems, '*English GeethegaLu*', which was translations of poetry from English into Kannada.

" '*Geleytira Gumpu*' is a poetry forum started in Dharwad. the then centre of literary activities. This forum actively worked towards popularising poetry. It is said that the poetry sessions and discussions on poetry held at the forum attracted lots of people from different walks of life. This forum initially started by Bendre, also had well known poets like Madhura Chenna. Gokak. Mugali. Anandakanda and many more.

¹² Under B.M. Sreekanthaiah's guidance poets like Ku.Vem.Pu, Pu.Ti.Na. Rajarathnam and others surfaced in Kannada. Early poems by these poets have appeared in '*Kiriya Kaanike*' and '*Taliru*'.

¹³ Kirthinath Kurthakoti. 1998

¹⁴ Kirthinath Kurthakoti. "Saahithya Matthu Sthreevaada", 1998, p. 41 1

¹⁵ G.S.Amur. "Mahila Kaavya Saadhane Haagu Samasyagal", in *Sudha Ugadi Vishshaanka* - 1999. Bangalore: The Printers Mysore Limited, 1999

¹⁶ _____, *Essays on Modern Kannada Literature*. Bangalore: Karnataka Sahithya Akademi. 2001

¹⁷ Vijay Kumar. "Kavita Ki Sangat" Panchkula: Adhar Prakashan, 1995

¹⁸ Bachchan Singh. "Hindi Sahitya Ka Doosara Itihas". Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan Private Limited, 2000

¹⁹ Suman Raje. "Hindi Sahitya Ka Asdha Itihas", New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith. 2003

²⁰—————, "The Creative World of The Contemporary Women Poets", in Singh, Virendra. *Sankalin Karila*, Jaipur: Panchsheel Prakashan. 1987. p. 1 17