

Language and Culture in Kanyasulkam

Dr. G. Srilatha, Reader in English, P.B. Siddhartha College of Arts & Science

Vijayawada, AP, India.

Abstract - Gurazada Appa Rao (1862-1915) was one of the pioneers of Indian theatre. He hails from Rayavaram village of Vishakapatnam. His love for drama emerged right from his childhood days. He was inspired by open air dramas, shadow plays, and fell in love with drama that culminated into the most famous play *Kanyasulkam*. The play was first performed by the “Jagannadha Vilasini Sabha” of Vizianagaram in 1892. *Kanyasulkam* is both the cult text and a serious indictment of modernity. The playwright's intent is serious, but his essential dramatic mode is comedy. On 13th August 1992, *Kanyasulkam* celebrated its hundredth birthday and is staged even today in various places. It is a prose play written in the Visakhapatnam dialect and still remains popular.

Gurazada Apparao Pantulu was a contemporary of Gidugu Ramamurthy and Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu. His play, *Kanyasulkam* was written to castigate the evils of child marriage and to encourage widow re-marriages. The dramatist wanted to prove that spoken Telugu could be an excellent medium for drama and with a kind of vengeance he mixed English words freely with Telugu. Appa Rao writes to his friend Vangolu Munisubrahmanyam, in *The Hindu* Dt. 27-2-1936, “I paint life, artistically idealizing, of course. Though art is my master, I have a duty to society.” He spent most of his life in the service of the Vijayanagaram rulers. He wrote most of his Telugu works in the spoken Telugu form.

Key words: *Kanyasulkam, widow remarriages, social evils, social reforms.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gurazada Venkata Appa Rao is acknowledged as a pioneer of modernism in Telugu Literature. The rise of the modern drama dates back to the eighteenth century when the British empire strengthened its power in India. English and Italian dramatic troupes toured India and performed many English plays mainly Shakespeare's in cities like Bombay and Madras. Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, the two great sage poets of India, are the first Indian dramatists in English. Secular playwriting in Bengali and Marathi began after the setting up of universities in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in the mid 1850's.

Telugu as undoubtedly a language of sweetness, culture, and politeness, and Sanskrit as the deva bhasha, the refined language of the elite, of civilization, and the devas themselves. Though his advocacy to remove Sanskrit elements from Telugu should be critiqued, his point about imposing archaic grammar structures from old medieval Telugu has resonance. Sanskrit has undoubtedly enriched Telugu, but that does not mean we should try to turn it into it. He notes:

The Telugu literary dialect contains many obsolete grammatical forms, an inconveniently large mass of obsolete words and arbitrary verbal contractions and expansions, necessitated by a system of versification based on alliteration and qualities. A license, which no doubt, has its own advantages of introducing Sanskrit words to any extent has been but too eagerly availed by poets who brought glossaries into requisition revealed in fantastic compound-formation, and made the Telugu literary dialect double dead (71).

He was both a social conscious and a literary innovator of great skill. *Kanyasulkam*, the first play in Telugu to deal with social issues was published in 1897 and is considered a landmark in the history of Telugu literature. *Kanyasulkam* appeared at the end of the nineteenth century when Telugu society was caught in the conflict between tradition and colonial modernity, and was ready for transition. Another important development that impacted the growth of Telugu literature around the turn of the twentieth century is the rise of modern sensibility. The two factors that shaped this development were colonial rule and

the consequent exposure of the West, and a growing sense of nationalism. Modernism in the context of Telugu literature may be identified with four interrelated trends. A self-reflexivity about the socio-cultural institutions resulting in a movement away from orthodoxy, a reform of language, a quest for newer forms of literary expression, and the growing significance of prose forms as direct means of dissemination of ideas and ideologies. Gurajada's *Kanyasulkam* exemplifies all these trends and represents the essential spirit of the time in which it was created. The play makes a strong plea against the system of bride-price, the practice of selling girls as brides to old men. The play also succeeded in fashioning a colloquial idiom suitable for dramatic presentation.

II. KANYASULKAM – A SOCIAL EVIL

A literary wizard rose in the second half of nineteenth century. He was one of the brightest luminaries that the Telugu literary field ever could boast of that master figure is Gurajada Venkata Appa Rao. Appa Rao chose comedy to voice his protest against social stigma like bride price. A serious social evil like *Kanyasulkam* which raised its ugly head had been satirically portrayed in his work, by using weapons like wit, humor, and irony to sever its poisonous fangs. The message had been carried into the hearts of all Telugus; it was an instant hit with them, as Appa Rao made typical dialect of Vijayanagaram, his plastic instrument to convey the ethos of the then society. It is an experimental drama, as it could be considered as the harbinger of modern Telugu drama. Frequent usage of broken English by characters like Girisam tickled the ribs of the audience. Appa Rao could successfully make use of the modern dramatic devices to overwhelm the traditional ills and evils.

C. Vijaya Sree and T. Vijaya Kumar both working as English Professors in Osmania University did a wonderful job by translating this work from Telugu into English. By doing so they could capture the fineness of language, the typical Vijayanagara dialect, which is the very hallmark of this work has been retained without losing an iota of its original flavor and essence. This paper focuses on how the English version of Telugu masterpiece *Kanyasulkam* through its language conveyed the moral and social culture of Telugu's in the late Nineteenth century. Translating the text poses problems as it employs linguistic codes and varied cultural registers in caste, class, gender and regional difference. Similarly, Telugu idioms and curses are difficult to translate for instant a traditional Brahmin like Lubdhavadhanlu uses "May a chicken be roasted in your house" as a curse, a non-brahmin takes it as a blessing.

III. IMPACT OF SOCIAL AND MORAL CULTURE

The paper focuses on the impact of social and moral culture of late 1800's of Telugu society. Literature is just not a mirror of social milieu, its job is not only to entertain and enlighten the society but also to reform and reframe the disjointed moral and social structure and set up. There were

at that time many social evils which had to be eradicated, such as early marriages, marriages of very old men with very young girls, bride price, the prostitution of dancing girls, corruption among officials, drinking, beliefs in ghosts, superstition and witchcraft - all of which hindered the growth of a healthy, cultured society. And the themes also reflect particular society and the traditional beliefs of a particular group of people, which comes to them because of the traditional methods of education and neglecting the wide range of understanding the things with reason, which he strongly believes of accepting what is good in every system of education. This idea can be seen in some child characters and one lead character, who exaggerate certain things which have strong roots in the society through his education, i.e. English.

Gurajada Appa Rao was moved by the evil practices of bride price, child widowhood during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which made him write *Kanyasulkam* as an effort of social reformism. Girls at ten years of age were married to men of 65 years of age or older for a sum of Rs. 1,000. These girls sooner land up in a state of widowhood. These child widows led a pathetic existence deprived of basic comforts, and even the small pleasures of life. The pain, agony, grief, and frustration of these helpless beings are explicitly brought out in the play.

The characters in the drama were drawn from the realities of life. The author had in his mind some of his contemporaries whose traits of character helped him portray the main characters of his drama. A social play intended to advance the cause of social reform or correct the social evils of the age may be popular for a period, but it is unlikely to interest the future generations that do not suffer from such evils nor face such problems.

The play unveils the tyranny of late nineteenth century caught between the collapse of an old cultural order and the uncertain emergence of a new one. The writer subjects both tradition and modernity in the play. Although the writer's intention is serious, with effective dramatic mode, the play has explicitly exhibited a range of comic devices as mimicry, disguises. The writer has used a variety of fruitful inter textual links with a number of literary texts, styles of yester years and engages in carnivalesque entertainment. It is English that provides Gurajada a clue to the reform of the use of Telugu literary dialect as the chief reason for the lack of reading habits among Telugu people. English with its association of modernity came in handy for him.

In the words of Gurajada, 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 given currency to a high standard of moral ideas. Gurajada's play was a conscious literary effort aimed at reforming the society. The play deals with young girls being married to older men and this inevitably meant the death of their husbands and their consequent

widowhood. There was no system of widow re-marriage and therefore the girl had to lead a long life of widows without any possibility of enjoyment. Denied the pleasures of life in the normal course, some of them ended up looking for secret affairs to satisfy their natural physical desires that resulted in abortion. The play is also about the nautch question that was being debated at the end of the nineteenth century. These dancing girls who enjoyed royal patronage in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were treated very shabbily in the late nineteenth century and were reduced to the position of prostitute.

The purpose of writing the play is to arouse public opinion against this practice by exposing the evil in a popular drama. Apart from the social evils the play deals with the effect of British colonialism on the Telugu society. The effect is seen in the realms of education and culture. The relationship between colonialism and modernity is linked with English education and culture. The play dramatizes the conflict between Indian attitudes towards English education, the debates concerning, the advantages and reservation towards some aspects of English culture. While some characters recognize English as a language of opportunity, as a language that gives them social status and prestige, others comment on its domination of indigenous cultures and traditions.

English gives a certain position and power to certain character example Girisam. The power of the individual who possess the language arises from the fact that this knowledge is unavailable to the others, much the same power Sanskrit scholars enjoyed in the past. The play actually uses many English phrases; refer to English habits and tastes not only to point to the possibilities for change within the Telugu society, but also to have fun at their expense.

For example in Act II conversation between Venkamma and Agnihotravadhanlu exhibit a value for English education and reveal a sense of fascination and a blind adoration for it. Similarly the scenes depicting Girisam's imparting of "English Education" to his disciple Venkatesam are a classic instance both of the importance of English as well as a commentary on it. English also gives a person a false sense of respect. Girisam is thought of as knowledgeable and a gentleman precisely because he is able to rattle out a few sentences and quote from English literary texts.

While it is true that Agnihotravadhanlu does not want to spend any money on his son's English education, it is also true that he did not have to spend a paisa on books to learn fifty chapters of the Vedas. Girisham praises him for his Vedic scholarship. English is automatically associated with questions of modernity. Girisam's claim to respect and status is based on the assumption that English education provided them with the wherewithal to civilize Indians steeped in superstition. Girisam tells his disciple that he

gave him lectures on widow marriage and the nautch question because of his education at Poona Deccan College.

The play centre's round the fact that Karataka Sastrulu has to avert the marriage of his niece with the old man. For this he takes the help of Mahesam, his disciple, who disguises himself as a girl who would be offered in marriage to the old man at a lesser rate. In this context it will be pertinent to remember the conversation between Karataka Sastrulu and Mahesam when Karataka Sastrulu promises that he would give his daughter in marriage to his discipline if they succeed in his plan by sweating with a book in his hand in particular with the English book, as he needs a strong oath. The play proceeds merrily on this knowledge being kept a secret from most of the characters. Madhuravani helps Karataka Sastrulu in the play to avert the marriage of his niece.

Mahesam's disguise as a girl which is kept a secret from most of the characters propels the action of the whole play. We cannot forget the scene involving Madhuravani, Ramapantulu, Girisam with the entry of the boarding house woman with a broom for its situational humor. The play is an excellent example of the interplay of English and Telugu. It is English that provides Gurajada a clue to the reform of the use of Telugu dialect as the chief reason for the lack of reading habits among Telugu people.

The play aims to educate people against child marriage of buying child brides. The movement against child marriages started by Sri Kandakuri Viresalingam was already in progress by that time Gurajada was successful in his mission. The purpose of the play is to arouse public opinion against this practice by exposing the evil in a popular drama. Kanyasulkam is remembered by many Telugus for the brilliant performances of some of the actors who played the roles of Girisam, Madhusavani etc, The play employs conventional theatrical techniques like disguise, aside, situational humour to great effect. Mahesam's disguise as a girl which is kept a secret from most of the characters propels the action of the whole play. We cannot forget the scene involving Madhravani, Ramappantulu, Girisam with the entry of the boarding house woman with a broom for its situational humor. This play brings to mind Restoration and eighteenth century British Drama, particularly the comedy of manners.

IV. OLD MEN – TEENAGE GIRLS' MARRIAGES

In the play, the practice of a ripe old man marrying a girl-child and soon after the death the bride's father filing a suit against the old man's heirs to get back the money he had paid for the marriage of his daughter is well explicated. It also refers to the corruption of the purohit who takes bride to give false evidence. When Karatuka Sastrulu approaches Madhuravani to save the marriage of his niece whom his brother-in-law was going to give in marriage to an old man, she underlines the importance of money in his business.

She says that the only way to avert this marriage is to sell another girl to the prospective groom for a lesser price.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Kanyasulkam has so much significance in Telugu Literature. It deals with so many topics, the topics which need reform because of their innocence, like corruption, language reform, selling girls, bride price, widow remarriages, nautch question, greedy people, etc.,. All the issues are dealt with humor. Gurajada opposes this type of evil practices in the society. He makes people realize their mistakes, about how greedy they are and indirectly mentions that selling girls to old people is not good just for the sake of money. The reason behind the child marriage is not enjoyment but to get an unpaid slavery to do the housework. So, Appa Rao opposes child marriage because the girls would be bonded laborers'.

Superstition became a useful term for the description of religious ideas. Bad omens like people come across a

widow, snake or cat and a sanyasi etc., before leaving the house or after leaving the house for any business purpose, they are considered as omens. Good omens are like, hearing the temple bell ring, seeing a married women, flowers etc.,. These were the beliefs people had at that time. Brahmins are supposed to be pure and harmless, and they are expected to do good to others. On the contrary in child marriage they are selling or marrying young children for petty reasons and indulge in illegal activities. Thus Appa Rao has addressed all the evil practices in the society in a humorous manner. The language used by the characters and English language reflects the conflicts and the culture of the people.

REFERENCES

- [1] C. Vijayasree, T. Vijay Kumar. Kanyasulkam by Gurazada Appa Rao. Book Review Literacy Trust, 2002.
- [2] Narla V.R., Makers of Indian Literature: Gurazada. Sahitya Akademy: Delhi, 1979.

