

Unexplored Terrains of the Literary Past

A Close Reading of T P Kailasam's poem

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ABSTRACT

Indian Writing in English has quite a long history. This dates back to the eighteenth century. But the list of writers and their literature that we are familiar with, is inadequate and incomplete. Scholars seem to assume that if anybody has written they should have been known to us by their publications. But unfortunately this is not true.

There have been several good Indian writers in English during the twentieth century who have not become famous, or even familiar to the readers and critics. Though they are very familiar and prolific writers in their local languages, they are not reputed as Indian writers in English.

This paper focuses on such an Indian writer in English of the past. This unsung poet of the twentieth century, Surprisingly, is a well established writer in Kannada, but his abilities in English writing remains unknown to the scholars of Indian writers in English. The paper makes a close reading of one of his poems to prove that he is at par with his established contemporaries and deserve to be taken into the mainstream, academically. The fame and success of this writer in Kannada has eclipsed his writings in English.

Keywords: Indian Writing in English, long history, Writers not famous, unsung poet of 20th century.

Scholars take pride in tracing the history of Indian writing in English which dates back to as early as 1864, where Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya wrote the first novel ever written in this genre, '*Rajmohan's Wife*'. Or, if we consider non-fiction, a travelogue written by Sake Dean Mohammad entitled, '*Travels of Dean Mohamed*', which takes us further back to 1793, which was published in England. Since then, to the present day, literature has flourished profusely drawing the attention of the readers and critics of the world.

Today, we know our contemporary Indian writers in English like vikram Seth, Aravind Adiga, Chetan Bhagath, Eunice De Souza, Shobha De. Rakesh Satyal, are only a few to mention. Despite a huge bulk of new authors are born every week, we somehow manage to keep track of most of them. They keep hitting the headlines in our media and stay in our memory. But as far as the writers of the past are considered, we seem to assume that all writers are already recognized, mentioned and studied in the academic circles. And nothing more remains to be explored.

This paper intends to introduce one such writer who is well known in Kannada literature but his contribution to English literature is eclipsed by his own reputation in Kannada. The list of about 270 writers prepared by Wikipedia as English language writers from India does not include this writer's name. There are many such competent Indian writers in English within Karnataka, who have not come to lime light for several reasons. Such similar examples may certainly be found in the other vernacular states as well.

It is time the academia identifies such writers and brings them to the main-stream of writers. Their publications are inaccessible, and the local critics review, and honour their writings in regional vernacular, but they keep their English works, as not their cup of tea. This provides a virgin field of literary analysis.

This paper intends to introduce T P Kailasam, a relatively familiar writer, known for his drama. Considering the bulk, the contribution of T P Kailasam to the English writing is very little. His entire writing in English is about 216 pages and he has written only fifteen very short poems that run up to 19 pages. Four of his plays in English *The Burden*, *Fulfilment*, *The Purpose* and *The Brahmin's Curse* make 197 pages, and only the remaining 19 pages of his poetry cannot claim to call him an Indian writer in English.

Let us first examine how he is assessed as a Kannada playwright. T P Kailasam's works essentially are contemporary and relevant to the present society. Tyagaraja Paramasiva Kailasam is reputed as a great humourist in Kannda. Born in 1884, in Mysore to a high court judge, was a gifted artist. Through out his career as a student he was very bright and secured first rank and won awards all along. He studied Geology in London in 1909, by his scholarship sponsored by the then Government

of Karnataka. Even in England , he secured a Gold medal in Geology, from the Royal Geological Society of London.

With these accolades he got a job when he came back to India, but he resigned it and called himself unemployed and unemployable. He took up literary writing as his full time affair.

He is celebrated for his sense of humour. His first play Tollu Gatti written in 1918, created ripples in the field of Kannada drama. It reached the common man hither to literature was just for the elite. He was the first person in Kannada drama to use colloquial usage of Kannada and code mixing of English. His Kanada plays consisted of marginalized characters that hold a mirror to the contemporary society and exposing its evil practices. While his English plays chose topics and characters from the great Indian epics. His plays are a blend of satirical humour with realism and Idealism.

There are sparingly a few reviews and critiques of the plays of T P Kailasam, where as there is not a single article published any where about his poems. This paper tries to make a close reading of one of his poems.

Truth Naked

WE call thee 'brother', Scavenger;
We lie, believe us not:
Would we dare set our kindred on
The task that is thy lot?

We call thee 'friend', O Scavenger;
We lie, believe us not:
Thy Home reeks ranker than Latrines,
And we reck not a jot.

We call thee 'hero', Scavenger;
We lie, believe us not:
A soul that conquers flesh is not
A carrion-feeding sot.

Until we callous callid brutes
For dread of Wrath Divine,
Desist from crime of coz'ning thee
To play the human swine;

Until thy sodd'n eyes do awake
 To thine own manliness,
 Our cant of "brother", "hero", "friend",
 Is balderdash, no less!

Truth Naked is a 20 line poem with five quatrains. There is a regular rhyme in the second and fourth line of each stanza. There is a refrain in the middle of the stanza that appears only in the first three stanzas.

The theme chosen is topical for today. The persona of the poem uses the first person narration and identifies himself in plural form, in which he actually is not a part! The WE in the poem refers to pseudo-sympathizers who speak of bringing equality, and boast of being the “Voice of the voiceless”, but they are not really so. The persona knows how they pretend and the coming lines convince the reader that he is the really concerned person. The word ‘Scavenger’ is treated as a proper noun of an individual, even by beginning it with a capital letter. This is a generic reference to all the downtrodden people of his profession.

Considering the period in which this poem was written by T P Kailasam, we realize how socially aware, revolutionary and broad-minded he was, during as early as in 1923. Mulk Raj Anand’s celebrated work, *Untouchable* was published in 1935. And *Coolie* later followed next year, in 1936. So T. P Kailasam is one of the pioneers of writers who evoked the Dalit consciousness in Indian English writing. But unfortunately very few people know him.

Almost a decade before Mulk Raj Anand critically examined and exposed the deplorable task of carrying night-soil by a particular section of the was society, in his novel, T P Kailasam had already written this short poem covering this vital point in an epitomized way. He questions boldly if anyone, who shows lip-sympathy to the Scavenger, would ever dare expect or allow their children do the task those scavengers are doing. He argues that only can they call him brother, or friend or hero.

It needed a great amount of courage and broadminded attitude to question the pseudo – revolutionaries of his contemporary period. The poet proceeds in his next stanza to compare the hygiene of the Scavenger’s home to the latrines he cleans everyday. We realize that the sensitive poet

has observed the dis-heartening and poor living conditions which are without any exaggeration, worse than the public latrines that he attends to.

He proceeds in the next stanza to say that those fake people who make a hero out of this drunkard who feeds on putrefying meat, have never seriously planned to improve the living conditions. It is merely the oral encouragement and words of praise that they shower on him.

These insensitive and unsympathetic people who do not even have a moral fear, have not realized that God is angry with them for making these human beings mere virtual pigs that feed on filth and cleanse it.

T P Kailasam concludes the poem, with a remark that only when these Scavengers whose eyes are always drowned with tears and poverty, awake and protest, some natural justice can be provided to them. If they do not, all the endearing and fake words like brother, hero and friend, are meaningless.

T P Kailasam has clearly criticised the rising trend in vogue in his period where the sympathising leaders gain the status of heroes, in the public eye, with mere words and no action.

It is right to conclude with a remark that T P Kailasam's above poem, Truth Naked is at par or even more superior to any poem written in his contemporary period. Both in terms of the topical social relevance of the poem and the very style of presentation with all the stylistic flourishes deserve to be considered as a major poet in IWE. And this deserves to be included in the college syllabus.

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