Representation of Women in early South Indian Novels

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ABSTRACT
The tradition of writing Novels (in the European Sense) starts late in South India. Most of the Novels written during this period are in the regional tongues. The early writers understood that the novel could be used as means to usher in Social Reform. Hence in the first part of the 18th century we see a rise in 'Social Novels'. The novel addressed many social evils plaguing the society at that times, Poverty, Illiteracy, Caste, Domination, Freedom and others. Women's reform was also a major issue at the time. In the present paper we will look at some of the early Novels and their treatment of Social Reforms related to Women and how women were generally represented in the Novels.

KEYWORDS
Social Realism, Social Reform, Women's Reforms, Novel as a means of change, Genre Novel in early South India

A study of the origins of the genre 'novel' in India shows us that it is not entirely derived/Influenced by the European form but as a recent literary historian Namwar Singh, points out, "[It] grew out of the tension between the western world and indigenous narrative traditions" (Singh 2). Narrative forms like the *katha*, *kadambari*, *purana* and others played an important role and we can trace a lineage of prose narratives in our indigenous languages.

The growth and spread of the genre of the "novel" in India was neither simultaneous or nor did it correspond with any pattern. It was as sporadic and as disparate as possible. The regions which were heavily influenced by missionaries and colonial education initiatives were the first to absorb or evolve this form.

Hence the early issues that the Novel addressed were of Social reforms. Most of the early novels in South India, as in the rest of India were "realistic" in their representation. The narratives dealt with contemporary society and the issues troubling it. Even in the case of the novel being set in a historical age–of kings and princesses–the author betrays a concern with contemporary issues which appear in a different form in those "historical" novels

The writers were at times critical of the "development" notions propagated by the British and the missionaries which were limited to the fields of education, women's reforms, and administrative and financial reforms. The writers themselves were situated in the metropolitan colonial centres, working mostly in the colonial administration. They wrote about the villages to an urban audience which was sympathetic, and which encouraged the development or the reformation of the village.

One of the major issues which most of the novels highlight is that of women's education. Most of the people did not send their female wards to school. Some of them did if it was an "all women's school". It was in Bengal that the missionaries started a school for women in 1821. The students who mainly attended these schools were from "respectable but poor

families" (Das 111). Education figures prominently in all the social novels of the period. The authors in general represented the "women's question", which along with education involved fighting against the practice of Sati, the role of woman in the house, her duties and her role as the cultural bearer of the generation. Indira Bai (1899) is about Indira and her emancipation through education and widow remarriage. Lakshmi the heroine of The Fatal Rumour (1896) is also educated and she writes a letter to her husband. Saraswatividjayam (1892) does not concern itself with the "women's question" per se, for it tries to deal with lower castes and their education and subsequent reform; but, even here we find that the most important woman character in the novel, Subhadra, is English educated. The Fortune's Wheel (1880) does not have any English educated women characters because the novel is partly set in a historical time. Even in this novel we find a strong woman character, Rukmini, who masquerades as a man and makes a new identity for herself. This crossover can also be found in Vedanayakam Pillai's Tamil novel Pratapa Mudaliar Carrittiram (1878. The author writes in his preface to the novel about the heroine Gnanambal who, "rises to sovereign power in the disguise of a man, and administers the government with great wisdom and ability" (Asher 186). From a feminist perspective, these two instances can be dismissed for they show women having power only when they act as males. Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind the age and the culture when these were written, and for those times such representation was also a subversive trend. Thus we can finally say that even if the novels were not set in the present, they still concerned themselves with the representation of women from a reformist angle. This was about South India, but we can see that the pre-occupation with "women" was present across India in the social novels of the age. The first novel in English, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohun's Wife which was serialized in 1864 also dealt with women, if not with their education or reform directly. As Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it, "[T]he suffering of women is central to Rajmohan's Wife" (Mukherjee, Rajmohun's Wife 143). The first Marathi novel Yamuna Paryatan by Baba Padamji is about widow remarriage. The first Malayalam novel Indulekha is about a strong-willed, English and Sanskrit educated woman. In a letter to the translator the author of the first Malayalam novel Indulekha, O. Chandumenon says:

> The only thing which my readers might reasonably take exception to is Indulekha's knowledge of English; but as one of my objects in writing this book is to illustrate how a young Malayalee woman, possessing in addition to her natural personal charms and intellectual culture would conduct herself in the matters of supreme interest to her, such as the choosing of a partner in life, I have thought it necessary that my Indulekha should be conversant with the richest language in the world. (Arumina 207)

Gurajada Appa Rao's play Kanyasulkam (1897), a comic satire, attacked the injustices done against women and also showed the hypocrisy of the reformers themselves. As the blurb on the recent English translation of the book says, "Kanyasulkam deals not only with the evil practice of bride–price, but also with several other, and perhaps inter-related social issues of the time–child marriage, widow remarriage and the 'nautch question'". Even in Gurajada's short stories this reformist zeal and engagement with the new woman can be seen. In "Kamalini", he tries to expose the hypocrisy of the reformers, who, while during the day support the anti-nautch, but go at night to watch the very same nautch girls! This can also be seen in Kanyasulkam. In another short story "Matilda" Gurajada tries to show how education need not always lead to reform or emancipation if one does not have a supporting and understanding partner. A. Madhaviah wrote a powerful novella titled Muthumeenakshi in Tamil. This novel was different from the others in the way it tried to address the question

of widow remarriage. Whenever a widow remarriage is presented in the novels, the widows generally are child widows whose marriage had not yet been consummated. This was even supported by groups supporting widow remarriage like the Brahmo Samaj, or Kundukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu's Women's Remarriage Association (WRM) and others. Madhaviah's novella in this matter is bold for it goes against the practice advocated and shows the marriage of a woman whose marriage had been consummated. All these works however suffer from a lacuna, which can also be said of the literature of the nineteenth century–the neglect of the voice of the woman, what she herself had to say about these reforms and about herself when the men had taken the responsibility upon themselves to reform them. Sita Anantha Raman argues thus with reference to the early Tamil novels:

> Male descriptions of women were laced with anxious fastidiousness, which show that, despite their advocacy of women's education and social participation, they did not seek to overturn all existing norms of female sexuality and gender roles. As these male authors viewed female domesticity as essential to social stability, their maternal heroines performed their preeminent functions in the household. (Raman 104)

Literature by women writers differs from that of men foremost in the point of view they bring on to their subjects and their politics. The writers reveal to us what they have to say about reforms and the role men played in them. But even within these writers we find a contradiction in terms of those who subscribe to the male and nationalist ideology and thus tend to echo it, and thus see themselves as defined by the male writers. An example of this would be Krupabai Satthianadhan's Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life. This shows us the success of the male ideology in subordinating women and making them accept that they are low, and therefore they cannot decide what is best for themselves unless decided by men. Her novel Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Life, for example, can be read as a story of the inadequacies of the reform movements, of the foregrounding and subsequent marginalisation of the "women's question", and the rise of the "New Woman" in the nineteenth century. The New Woman's engagement with the new patriarchy and the latent nationalistic discourse catapulted them into the role of the saviours/protectors of the national culture. Nationalist discourses highlighted the threat from European influences and the inability to escape it. Partha Chatterjee brings out this predicament clearly: "In the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity" (Chatterjee 121).

The division between the "home" and the "world", the "spiritual" and the "material" resulted in a discourse which demanded that women must take responsibility for protecting and nurturing the national culture. Women and their freedom were thus limited by tradition and by the reigning notions of feminine virtues, which ironically were arbitrarily fixed by men. Literature thus, as a representative of this age acts as a site where this home/world, material/spiritual dichotomy can be established.

Most of the fictional work produced during this age is susceptible to this dichotomist ideology. Examples can be cited from both English and Indian languages: Saguna (1895) by Krupabai Satthianadhan, Rajmohun's Wife (1864) by

Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Indulekha (1899) by O. Chandumenon, Indira Bai (1899) by Gulvadi Venkat Rao and others. A homogenised reading of the new woman–centric novels (as listed above), as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue, will show that

> placed at the centre of their plot [was] a young Hindu woman, often a widow. The narrative posed her life as a problem, which the author proceeded to elaborate, complicate and then resolve. Invariably the story argued the need for her independence, and advocated women's education. (356)

Nevertheless, we do have female authors who try to break out of this ideological subjugation. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita show in their anthology of Indian women's writing, there were rebellious voices even then of women who suffered "the pain of being constantly watched and corrected; the feeling that they were not good enough [….]" (Tharu and Lalita 160). Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, in her English short story, "Sultana's Dream" (1905) writes that it is women who have allowed themselves to be controlled by men. Though the story is a dream sequence, she actually harbours the dream of men being confined to the *murdana*, and women actually moving on the streets without fear and without the veil. The reason for the subjugation and confinement of women as she gives is because

> [a] lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests. (Hossain 345)

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