



Senescence and Gender in the Tulu Play *Raya Ravuthe – The King’s Horseman*

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Abstract

The play Raya Ravuthe can be studied from the perspective of masculinity and old age in the ruling class. Set against the historical background of Portuguese attempts at invading the Chouta kingdom at Ullal, and often referring to other regional invaders from the South, the play highlights the working of gender and power institutionalised in the office of the king. The play is also based on the medieval hero Kumara Rama, worshipped in many temples in Uttara Kannada. Kumara Rama, son of Kampila Raja, was said to have loved an aboriginal girl who then became his father’s wife. The young woman is rebuffed by the prince in her attempts to seduce him. The young queen then fills the king’s ears and the old king orders that his son be put to death immediately. The prince’s half-brother is a look-alike, and sacrifices himself. Kumara Rama then goes on to help his old father in several battles against their enemies, and dies in one such battle. Amrutha Someshwara has tapped into this source to weave a fascinating play of love, strife, and loyalty. The present paper explores the mythic and folkloristic expression of patriarchal power vested in the aging body of the king, and the responses of a young wife contesting such power. The paper attempts to analyse cultural anxieties and insecurities that go together with power and privilege.

Keywords: gerontology, martial, objectification, ageism, Tulu, Ullal, Someshwar

The play begins with the narrator, or Sutradhar commenting on the great royal powers that reigned in the region of Dakshina Kannada some centuries back. Of these, the Choutas of Ullal were very prominent. Though Ullal had Rani Abbakka to boast of for the challenge she posed to the invading Portuguese power in the sixteenth century, the play *Raya Ravuthe* does not touch upon her feats. The play instead, uses the story of Kumara Rama, is male-centric as far as valour is concerned, and does not therefore depict women here as having the martial and political power that men have. The young queen, Neelamma, is incarcerated in the palace, and has to resort to scheming and manipulation to get her way. Married off to the ageing king she does not love, her transgressive love for his son unfolds a series of unfortunate incidents after the prince, Somanath stoutly rebuffs her overtures of love. The old king who dotes on her, is convinced by his young wife that Somanath had tried to force himself on her. The irate king orders that his son be put to death instantly. But the minister manages to save him when a friend comes forward to sacrifice himself instead. The prince, now moving around incognito, responds to the cries of distress of the citizens, and rescues them from the series of dacoity that strikes the kingdom. When the Portuguese navy is thwarted by Somanath, the minister discloses his identity to the old king. The queen’s machinations and lies are now exposed, and she chooses to kill herself. Unlike

Rani Abbakka, Neelamma is not assigned any of the qualities of the *veeranganas* who are portrayed as valiant women waging battles against enemies. The *veeranganas* like Abbakka occupy masculine space, and exhibit leadership, command loyalty, and are accorded respect by the men they lead. The role of the protector, and the one who is expected to sacrifice their own life if needed, is what sets the *veerangana* apart from women whom men desire for their beauty and charm. Neelamma and other such young queens thus need to use feminine wiles to get their way.

Transcendence is granted to man, but as Simone de Beauvoir observes, the woman is consigned to immanence, and is immured and sequestered. She is at best, an object, in this play, for the amusement of the old husband, as the recipient of his indulgent love. While men here can sublimate their desires through homo-social exploits, the same is not granted to the young, sexually frustrated queen Neelamma. But the men, at least the youth, are represented as protectors of the weak. Somanath undertakes the task of saving women in distress when cornered by hoodlums attempting to rob them of their gold ornaments. Men in the play are often in the *garodi* or gymnasium, for, a fit male body alone could withstand ordeals. The *garodi* permeates the consciousness of Tuluvas through the legend of the folk-heroes Koti-Chennaya recited in *paddanas*. The male body thus feels a rush of adrenaline that keeps it going against all odds. The men in the play experience freedom of mobility – unchallenged freedom to roam around the kingdom – the price for enacting the role of protectors.

The woman, perforce needs to manipulate men, get them to do her bidding, and appeal to their male honour and chivalry. The maid Chenni cajoles Lakkana, who belongs to the homo-social group of young men depicted in the play, to do her bidding that would favour the queen. Ever gallant, he responds thus:

“Chenni, I would do anything for your sake. Should I cross seven seas and string pearls together and get them? Shall I drain the water of nine lakes? I will jump off the jutting rock at Someshwar if you tell me to!”

Though intended more as a rhetorical reassurance, this dramatic avowal of love is a familiar trope in folktales, ballads, movies, plays, and other literary and performative genres. Masculinity is represented in these genres with traits of valour, undying love for the paramour, and therefore also vulnerable to manipulation by female characters. A ‘true’ man, a ‘real’ man must be prepared to do all of this. This exaggeration of chivalry is the prerogative of a heroic man wielding some degree of power, and for whom, the object of desire is the bedecked body of the woman, pearls and all.

Again, for the old king, Neelamma is literally the object of his devotion, and is his prized possession. Male worth does not count for much when shorn of material possessions and trophies that announce his class, and his power:

“You are the most precious *thing* in my life, the emerald pendant round my neck! Do I need to elaborate that I would offer up my entire kingdom for your sake? [emphasis added]... You alone are the main entrance to this precious palace of mine. You are like auspicious silver to me.”

She is also his ‘most beloved parrot in a gilded cage’, but whose feathers now seem to have been ruffled by a wild-cat. Passages such as these disclose the sense of self-worth and masculine power that is contingent on the female recipient of male largesse by the very lack of power and agency of the latter.

There is a closing of ranks between men in the play. This is especially so between young men. But even when age divides them, as in the case of the king and the prince, a shared male honour prevents transgression. A woman young enough to be one’s wife, is seen as a maternal figure, in order to uphold the older king’s claim over his wife. As observed by Eva Sedgwick, the homo-social world of men cannot be understood adequately unless one sees the gender dynamics at play, and the role of women as perceived by them. Right in the beginning of the play, it is evident that there is a tacit male

understanding about the spaces to be granted to women. Neelamma has never had a real opportunity to even set eyes on Somanath, who spends most of his time in male zones inaccessible to women. She says,

“I have never had too many opportunities to see him. That’s why I couldn’t recognise him from afar.”

She finds him very handsome, and desires him even as the old king desires her. The male need to objectify women and bedeck them to signal masculine power and wealth, and keep them sequestered, is rejected by Neelamma. Somanath, as in the story of Kumara Rama, brushes aside her sexual overtures, and employs the strategy of diminishing his own adulthood by calling her *Chikkamma*. Refusing to play the role of the affectionate *chikkamma* – literally, younger mother, Neelamma perceives the aged husband as a rotten tree. The dangers inherent in an elderly man marrying a nubile woman are sought to be blunted through expensive gifts of gold and diamonds. But the young queen finds the palace a ‘mere prison’ and her own body a ‘lifeless wax-doll’. Neelamma, embodying the forces of natural desire, however, can no longer distinguish between socially accepted notions of right and wrong, moral and immoral, licit and illicit. In fact, she questions socially accepted notions of morality that penalise women. Desire for the young step-son suffuses her being. She says,

“When they came forth with a proposal for my wedding, I had actually presumed I was to marry the king’s son Somanath. I had built colourful castles in my mind. The marriage took place anyway. The felicitous dreams I had desired never materialised. All that I had craved for turned to dust. I am a creeper doomed to climb up a rotten tree.”

She chafes, “Is it enough to be a mere queen decked in pearls and diamonds? Why does a wooden pillar need a garland made of gold coins? Don’t we need peace of mind?”

Thus, while the young male body is to be set off from the ageing one by constant engagement in feats to prove one’s prowess, a shared male understanding will nonetheless involve an active thwarting of illicit female desire for young men and female revulsion for the old ‘rotten tree’. The shared male code will also pre-empt any liaison between the young queen and Somanath. Neelamma says,

“Isn’t it a sin when an old man, well past his prime, despite having a horde of wives, still marries a nubile girl and showers the flower garden of her dreams with live coal embers? Is a sin for a woman caught in a perilous whirlpool of deceit to love a man who is a suitable match for her in looks, youthfulness, and education?”

The concept of *ashrama dharmas* points towards *vanaprastha* or a withdrawal from active social life for men, particularly in old age. This idea also overturns the role of the Indian Patriarch or Karta, the male head of pre-colonial India who as provider was entitled to power, respect, and a hegemonic hold over the household. But far from progressing from *Sanyasa* or asceticism to giving up of social privileges and positions, kingship grants the old king rights he is not expected to give up. Ashis Nandy refers to the historical shifts under colonialism where the authority of the Karta is undermined in a reshaping of the identity of the Indian state (1983). The male body might age. But culturally, it still has certain privileges unconditionally granted to it. Marrying a girl young enough to be one’s daughter is one such, particularly when this maleness is combined with political power. The ‘parrot in a gilded cage’, as the old king calls his latest conquest, is only one among hordes of other precious ‘emerald pendants’ he possesses. When Neelamma challenges the deceit practised in getting her married to a ‘rotting’ trunk, and calls the palace an ‘infernal chamber’, the prince is quick to invoke proverbs, *dharma*, fate, hell, and all the other para-religious weapons that come in handy while defending masculine privileges. He retorts to the girl younger than him,

“Can the fate that’s inscribed on one’s forehead be erased with water? I am certainly not someone who will betray my father because of the lustful dalliance of the heart, and turn my back on *Dharma*, and descend into hell. You are akin to my mother Somala Devi.”

Neelamma dismisses his reasoning. She points at masculine practices legitimated socially, and identifies patrilineal dominance sanctioned through different acts including succession, horsemanship, dining, and even war, through prominent symbols. She says:

“Somu, do you too believe in those poems on heaven and hell? A son is allowed to saddle the father’s horse, ascend the father’s throne, sit in his palanquin, eat off the father’s dining plate, and swing the sword the father has wielded. All that is no sin. Only this is sinful?”

Somanath will do all in his power to uphold his father’s exclusive right over the body of his young wife. Here, male fear of senescence is implied in the projection of female desire for the handsome and the young. There is no male soul-searching and agonising here, and the right of an old man over his young conquest, one among many other concubines, is naturalised. All such cautionary tales about the seductive feminine machinations betray a common male anxiety to deal with senescence and to form an exclusive male world to contest and ward off these neuroses. . Simone de Beauvoir refers to the ‘othering’ of old men that is otherwise seen in the case of women (1977), putting old men and women on the same plane. Likewise, Catherine Silver refers to the degendering process in old age ‘demasculinises’ old men, earlier in power, now seen as asexual (2003). Someshwar’s play cushions such total relegation of the old king to the periphery, and hints at such a reading through the complex display of power and authority against the cultural fears of abnegation and degendering.

Raya Ravuthe demonstrates this twin male fear - of ageing, and of female inconstancy in love as a result, despite the backing of immense wealth and power. Old age and women are both to be dreaded. The homo-social world of young men in the play can be seen as furthered by the fear of the contaminating figure of the woman, as seen above. It is also an upholding of the collective identity, and the tacit bond of support of one another in this homo-social world. But the senescent figure of the father must be defended at all costs lest young wives plot, as shown in countless tales, against the decrepit male body. The play hints at possibilities of supplanting of old men by the young, and the psychological threats posed by the young who could substitute the old. This oedipal fear is shown as prevalent in western societies with the rise of individualism and the break-up of traditional patriarchal families. Sudhir Kakar differentiates the hierarchical kinship identities of filial piety and Bhakti that subordinates sons to fathers in India through mythological inversion of the oedipal threat by decapitation of the son instead by the father in the case of Ganesha, and the meek acceptance of the father’s power by the son and the latter’s desire to please the parents (2005). The current play too deflects any real challenge of the father, and the decapitation of a look-alike of the compliant son does take place. Filicide is central to the epic on Gandugali Kumara Rama by the Kannada poet Nanjunda in *Ramanatha Charithra*. Nonetheless, the fear of parricide and incest haunts this and other literary representations of masculinity too, and Someshwar hints at these complex readings. The play reveals cultural fears and insecurities in literary gerontology – envy of the young son, and fears of being supplanted. The spurning of the step-mother, as seen in *Kumara Rama* and *Raya Ravuthe* can be echoed in plays like *Phaedra*.

Inhabiting an old male body has different connotations when wealth and power go hand in hand. The old Chouta king can therefore threaten to yank out tongues, and impale those who commit unjust acts in his kingdom. When the young wife falsely accuses Somanath of attempts to molest her, the old king says,

“I shall have him trampled underfoot by an elephant. I shall give him a lashing with the horse-whip. I will have him pushed down the moat of the fort’s military camp. I shall chop off his neck. I shall spill his entrails.”

What could not be achieved ordinarily by a fragile old man becomes feasible when an old man wields tremendous power. Violent and terrible punitive acts become institutionally possible now. Fears around territoriality, ownership of women, and war underlie masculine expressions of insecure old age. But the play still manages to bring out ambivalent attitudes towards the figure of the aged male body. Subconscious phobia and revulsion are expressed obliquely and through ventriloquism. The sly Neelamma plays on the old king's insecurities and inner demons by lying that Somanath despised his old father and had said to her, "Your husband is a decrepit old man. A mere honeycomb without the large bee, sheer refuse sans the juice".

The old king is shown as embarking on hunting expeditions that tire him out, and as relying on intoxicating drinks that are meant to rejuvenate his aging body and spirit. He is portrayed as a king who has given over control of the kingdom to his ministers and generals, particularly in an attempt to get over the guilt of ordering his son's death – an inverse oedipal symbol. Again, when the Portuguese ships attack the Banga kingdom in Kudla, the Chouta king, an old man who once led 'bloody battles' as Neelamma observes, is loath to wage a war against the 'white-faced foreigners. Neelamma chides him for what she says is his 'indolent' attitude, and urges him to join the Banga king in battle. The old king replies, "The time when I would fight on the battle field is long past. Nonetheless, if the queen tells me to, I will take up the sword again." The old king might go on a few hunting expeditions to be reminded of his earlier vigour, but his reluctance to fight now is evident even as he gives in to the young queen. He tries to summon up some remnant male valour to prove his love for the young Neelamma, in whose eyes he must rise. The play hints at ageing masculinity and its vulnerabilities – fears of marginalisation, loss of authority, decline of sexual prowess, and deterioration of physical vigour. The old king needs to be rejuvenated with liquor after returning exhausted from the hunting expedition. Susan Sontag in her essay on gerontology writes that aging is a gendered process whereby women are penalised socially far more than men are. The latter, she says, are granted authority, character, and status in old age while signs of aging in women are framed as markers of personal defeat (1972). But in this play, aging has not stopped the old king from taking on newer and younger wives, nor from political control of the kingdom. But as Edward Thompson maps the renegotiation of masculine identity by ordinary men in western societies, the absence of a traditional cultural blueprint makes men navigate the shift from economic provider to roles of caregiving (2018). Many scholars of Masculinity Studies and Aging observe from Connell's idea of decline of the hegemonic male body that aging leads to some degree of contestation, anxiety, and shame, particularly for men from lower economic strata. For those in power, even as nominal heads as in the case of the old king in this play, token gestures of respect have to be made by subordinates. His honour and dignity have to be held up despite physical frailty and mental lassitude. In *Raya Ravuthe*, the minister is quick to reassure the old man that he did not have to fight. The minister says,

"Your Majesty need not come to the battle field. It is enough if you give the command. General Sankanna will be there. There are soldiers strong [and young] enough to wage war. When it's the question of the pride and glory of the kingdom, you can rest assured that there will be no deficiency..."

Though literary and mythological instances of old men leading wars exist, it is largely on the shoulders of young men that the safety of the entire kingdom rests. Adulation of young men who must kill or be killed is a social need for survival of a group. The army of the old king, comprising of valiant young men including his own son whom he had ordered to be killed, wage battles and protect their king and their kingdom. The old king is the titular head lacking the will and the strength to prove himself worthy still of the throne. The play thus exposes the vulnerabilities of old age, and the jealousy and insecurity that accompany it in a bid to cling amorously to beautiful young women. The playwright teases out cultural ambivalences around ageing and the aged. Immense socio-political power is still invested in the ageing king along with patriarchal privileges of ownership of young female bodies. The play reveals

male phobia of ageing and the failure of the male body to live up to cultural norms when past the prime. It reveals cultural fears of filicide and incest, and the objectification of women who are seen as manipulators trying to circumvent their marginality. While the legendary Kumara Rama dies a valiant hero in battle, Somanath survives in *Raya Ravuthe*, and is reconciled with the aged father, and it is the young queen who must die.

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