

Hounded by British Spies: the Angst and Tragedy of Regional Modernisms in Karnataka

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One of the major concerns of our collaborative research and dialogue is the dialectics between the forces of the global and the regional.

But, to the best of my knowledge, the paradigm for such research is unavailable in theatre studies centering around South Asia. The powerful and ambitious model of South Asian literary and cultural studies being developed in the works of the well-known Sanskritologist Sheldon Pollock suggests itself as a possible paradigm.¹ Unlike most writings on South Asian theatre, Pollock attempts a unified literary and cultural history of South Asia with intimate knowledge and understanding of primary material both in Sanskrit and Kannada texts and of enormous historical data. His basic concern and object of exploration is the way regional cultures negotiate trans-regional cultures, a question that assumes great significance in our times. In the light of the ancient Kannadal work on poetics *Kaviraja Marga*, he argues that this great watershed in South Asian history points to a dialogic negotiation in relation to the trans-regional classical metropolis of Sanskrit. This dialogic mode is neither one of complete surrender nor of total rejection. This model is fascinating though Pollock's approach, while trying to emphasize dialogue, blacks out areas of conflict and resistance inevitable in historical encounters between cultures. Equally interesting is the way Pollock examines the same dialogic patterns replicated in the history of Europe.

¹ See, Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men and The Literary Culture in History*

Inspired by this model, it is possible to theorize the rise of regional modernism in Kannada culture and theatre in dialogue with Western culture through English. This is a deviation from the notion of influences, which assumes that the regional cultures are receptive in a passive way. *The regional cultures accept only what they choose to accept because they are not without the power of volition.*

2

Translations, adaptations and imitations: these categories play a vital role in our theorization. The reasons are obvious. Regional modernisms emerged in the context of such exchanges, albeit unequal because of power relationships between unequal forces in the context of colonialism. One need not confine these categories and practices to purely textual exchanges. Octavio Paz has suggested that the notion of translation be broadened into a cultural, not just linguistic, category.² The category of adaptation was extremely important for the rise of Kannada modernism. For example, Shakespeare's adaptations have been more successful with our audiences than translations or imitations. The bold creative adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet by the great poet Kuvempu, *Raktakshi*, has worked infinitely better than painstaking translation of the same text by Ramchandra Deva. Similarly, adaptations of dress codes, cuisines, art forms, ideologies and concepts allow the regional culture to accept the trans-regional culture without subjugation. Kannada modernism, at its best, is thus an adaptation of English modernism.

3

Terminological indeterminacies plague critical writings in Kannada. This is occasioned by slipshod translations of English terms and critical practices. Though two separate terms *adhunikate/navodaya* and *navyate* are used to denote modernity and modernism respectively, these do not reflect ground

² Octavio Paz, 'Introduction', *Renga*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980, p.3

realities of theatre practice. The first term roughly corresponds to pre-independent period and the second, to post independent period. If bold experimentation is an important attribute of modernism, this is found in ample measure in drama and theatre of the period associated with modernity. Following the historiography of European theatre, we too have arrived at the chronology of modernity, modern and post-modern. Following KD Kurtukoti, I prefer to speak of three different phases of modernism than use three different terms.

4

Why am I prolonging the prologue so much? I must apologize. At the same time I have reasons.

I am primarily addressing fellow-scholars from other cultures in the context of unequal exchange of information about our theatre histories. One of the goals of a dialogue of this nature is to reduce unequal exchange and make it more reciprocal. Another reason is that though Kannada theatre culture could not help negotiating with European theatre for historical reasons, the chronological maps of our theatre do not and need not be coterminous.

Now I will straight away go on to speak about a very fascinating adaptation of modernism in the works of an early modern Kannada playwright Samsa (1898-1939). I would have preferred to talk about the productions of his plays. However, Samsa was far ahead of his times. There were very few productions of his works. True, there have been quite a few successful stagings of his plays in recent decades by talented directors. But none of them have been documented. Only a few photographs, indifferent reviews and director's personal memories remain. Incidentally, the paucity of theatre documents is a very serious disadvantage for a researcher in the area.

Though Samsa belongs to Kannada theatre culture which figures prominently in contemporary Indian theatre, he has been very much less translated or staged elsewhere. Even in Karnataka he is not very famous. For he is a most intractable and eccentric playwright.

Samsa's historical context was one of anti-colonial struggle and rise of Indian nationalism. Most literature and theatre of this period was inspired by ideals of freedom struggle represented figures like Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. One of the corollaries of nationalism was sub-nationalism: a regional identity that was thought complementary to pan-Indian nationalism. The national and sub-national ideology became the substance of literary and theatrical imagination. It constructed the myth of tradition, which, though meant to resist the colonizer, replicated the colonial image of India: a glorious past fallen on evil days. At the same time, it was highly critical of moribund conventions like caste and discrimination against women. In summary, it was a futile attempt to wed the wisdom of ancient India with the rationality of the west. This stereotyped understanding outlasted colonialism though during the second phase of modernism questioned tradition, it could not escape the cliché. The notion of tradition reinforced by the influence of Eliot and Pound died hard. Most literary, theatrical critical exercises can be summed up by a sentence by the famous poet BM Sri: 'I want the two girls wear each other's ornaments so that I could feast my eyes on them'.³ The two girls are of course east and west or English and Kannada.

The tradition invoked by them was a hold-all. Anything could go into it: Indian mysticism, western technology, nature and industry-just anything. The more sophisticated version of tradition were expounded by later scholars like Anantamurty and KV Subbanna. It is an unchanging essence that inherits all texts and practices of Karnataka though creative works at their best transcend their avowed

³ Sri BM: *English Geethegalu*, Bangalore: Kannada Sangha, Central College. 1926(pg1)

⁴ See Subbanna KV: 'Theatre and Community' in *Community and Culture*, Sagara, Akshara Prakashana, 2009

ideology. It was summed up in words such as harmony and peace as opposed to conflict and aggression. A related concept was community in which conflicting social forces of caste, class and gender. KV Subbanna argued repeatedly that theatre coeval with a harmonious community⁴. These non-dialectical Kannada self image came under severe attack only during the third phase of modernism which witnessed the empowerment of suppressed sections of Karnataka-women, Shudras and untouchable communities. They had nothing to do with holy cow of upper caste tradition.

The reason why I chose to speak of Samsa is that unlike other great giants in the first two phases of modernism, he lived the dialectics of his times uncompromisingly in his life and works.

5

'I was born on a day when God was completely ill' .These words of the Peruvian poet Ceser Valljo could have been written about Samsa.

His name was indeterminate. He signed his names in five different ways. Though born in a poor Brahmin family in a village, orphaned by his father in early childhood, flunking and giving up school, taking and giving up several jobs, found unfit for marriage, moving from city to city, though Mysore became some kind of center for this nomad, travelling to Africa and middle east for uncertain jobs, surviving plague and three suicide attempts, he always remained committed to one passion: to become a great playwright. Completely self-taught, he read voraciously and taught himself English, which he used in his notes and diaries. He also attained great command in old Kannada and epigraphy.

The greatest phobia of his life was being hounded by Mysore police whom he suspected to be British spies. A self-proclaimed non-believer, he was religiously committed to Mysore dynasty whose successor was still ruling in his life time. Unlike his forefathers, the present king was under the suzerainty of British Govt. This fact never bothered him.

In the midst of his troubled and threatened life, he wrote 23 plays all centering on the history of Mysore kings. However, 18 of his plays have disappeared. He may well have destroyed them out the fear of being tortured by Mysore police. The 6 plays now extant are the greatest gems in the language.

The plays that have survived his traumatic life, though somewhat reminiscent of Shakespere's histories, are unique in form, content and treatment. His dramatic art has no precedents either in Indian or Western traditions. Based on his own research into epigraphical sources and Max Wilk's 'History of Mysore Kings' written in English, his works celebrated the virtues and glories of Mysore kings, Ranadheera in particular.

Samsa's royalism had nothing to do with flattery of rulers of his times. All his heroes were dead. Though he is supposed to have written a 350 page letter to the then king of Mysore warning them against British spies in the guise of Mysore police, the king paid no heed to it. The present ruler known for his generous patronage to poets had not heard of this great devotee of his dynasty. His only refuge were the idealized kings of the past. However, the more he tried to deify and mythify his royal heroes the more he exposed the dirt and darkness in their situation. If we trust the tale and not the teller, Samsa always did the opposite of what he intended to do through his powerful subtexts.

That is why he chose defiant pen name for himself. Originally, it was Kamsa, the villain of the Krhna story. It was like a Christian naming himself Satan. When he submitted an early poem of his for publication, it changed into Samsa, a meaningless but sweet sounding name that remains the same even if read backwards.

6

Let me now attempt a brief summery and reading of his shortest play with an untranslatable name – *Boirudentembara Ganda*. Should I attempt to give a very bad translation, the title means "The Lord of

Many-Titled Ones". The chief technique of creating a superb word magic in the play is the recitation of the titles of the royal heroes. Samsa wrote this play with the express intension of hero worshipping the Mysore king Timmaraja II, who is extolled as greater than all other title bearing rulers and who is compared to the full moon in the mist of tiny twinkling stars.

This short but powerful play observes the three unities of time like a classical Greek tragedy though this is not a tragedy. The scene of action is outside the famous Shiva temple near Mysore. The occasion is an annual fair being held in a festive manner. The loyal supporter of the Mysore king, Nanjasetty, is brought on stage captive by two rebellious feudal lords. They want to insult and punish Nanja for having praised the Mysore king above the rebellious lords. Nanja Faces the king's enemies bravely and defeats them both in verbal and sword fights. At the moment of his victory the king arrives. Pleased by his loyal subject's devotion, he confers on him, his own choicest title indicated in the play's title. Nanja is filled with gratitude. Then enters the valiant wife of another feudal lord, Veeramalla. Named Madevammanni, she is one of the most powerful women in Samsa's plays. She is disturbed and irritated by the recitation of the king's title as it is interfering with the recitation of her husband's titles. She first challenges Nanja and then charges at the king himself. She is forced to do this because her commander is too afraid to carry out her command to attack the king. Though the king refuses to fight back, she heaps abuses on him and disarms him. With the point of his own sword she pushes away his royal turban. At this point her husband, Veeramalla arrives and he is confused to see what has happened. The quiet and confident king asks him to put the fallen turban on his head. Veeramalla is infuriated but also afraid. He also requests the king to guide him. The king engages Veeramalla in a sword fight and defeats him. He now makes Veeramalla into his feudatory ruler. At this moment of victory the king spells out sanctions against the three rebellious lords including Veeramalla. After this heroic gesture, he seeks to placate Madevammanni. He censures his loyal subject, Nanja for having challenged a woman defying the chivalric code. He commands him to bow down at her feet and ask for her forgiveness. Betrayed by her

commander and then by her husband, Madevammanni makes an exit helplessly invoking God in one explanation. Having staged this drama, the king now makes up with Nanja also. In a gesture of forgiveness, he takes Nanja's other name Appanna as another title of his.

Through this play of conflict of and exchanges of names and titles, Sansa appears to extol the king's balance exercise of power and forgiveness. However this is not what the play does. It depicts power conflicts in a naked way. Nanja is painfully reminded of his subject hood, after the symbolic assumption of the royal title. In the end he is punished for his loyalty. The king makes him go through humiliation and takes away his name. The moral superiority of the king over other feudal lords is nowhere evident. Though he does not fight back the challenging woman, he takes revenge by defeating her husband and reducing both of them to his servitude. Samsa's depiction of woman characters is always penetrating though all his plays are named off after male rulers. In this play, Madevammanni is a very powerful subtext. She enters the stage with a thunder, but goes out with a whimper, betrayed by the commander and then by her husband and humiliated by the king's condescending forgiveness, she speaks only in two exclamations after the king's victory. Though defeated for faults not her own, she is in no mood to forgive her husband or the king. After her last explanation invoking God she storms out of the stage. But where does she go? Samsa never tells us. The play culminates in the male king and his male subjects embracing each other in celebration of the symbolic union of the ruler and the ruled. The king's titles are again recited along with his new title- the name of his loyal subject. The subject has merged into his king like the devotee into God.

Because of the rich interplay of text and subtexts, Samsa's play is open to multiple possibilities of interpretations. When I asked Jambe, the well known director who has tried this out on stage three times as to how he did it on stage, he said that he had emphasized Nanja's pathos. But to my mind this overtly serious play can work best if it is done as a savage farce.

7

Samsa builds huge monuments through his plays. But his dark self always pulls it down. This happens in all his plays in different degrees. This is what makes him a fascinating modernist, whose practice embodies an unusual kind of adaptation of western modernism. Its highlights are a self destructive irony and intense anxiety in language.

Further his practice can be used as a powerful critique of notions or concepts that go with the more comfortable versions of Kannada modernism. The all pervasive ideology of pan Indian nationalism never gets anywhere hear him. He is too troubled to be comforted by promises of Nehru and Gandhi. Neither does he subscribe to the utopian projects of freedom struggle. The Kannada chauvinism of sub-nationalism never touched him. His loyalty was to a system he both idealized and denigrated in his works, Not for him the comforts of the past or future though he sought answers in the past.

The final act of his life and works was his fourth suicide attempt. The angst contained in his beautifully handwritten death note in English is self explanatory. Let me make this note the next and last section of my paper.

8

Mysore

14-2-1939

TO

WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

I (Sami Venkatadari Iyer) am swallowing, at about 9 p.m today (Tuesday, 14-2-1939) one hundred and fifty grains of veronal, as I wish to commit suicide, because it has become impossible for me to drag on this miserable existence of mine-persistently slandered, libelled, and persecuted as I have been, have been still and will ever be by the most underground, cowardly, mischievous and malevolent (Mysore), police mad dogs.

I am leaving thirty one rupees, one ana and nine pies (Rs 31-1-9) in the purse in my pocket; this amount is after my death for my body to be cremated, which I wish to be done in some open place and without any religious ceremony whatsoever, as I have no faith in any religion-My ashes to be scattered to the four winds of heaven.

May the British Empire in India until the very end of eternity! And may every one of the Mysore Police rats be rewarded (for their foulmouthed falsehood and calumnies and diligent devilries against me)-with dukedoms (if not with thrones!) by the unspeakable British conspirators against Mysore's KING and against the Mysore state!

Sami Venkatadri Iyer5

5 Vaikuntharaju BV(ed): *Samsa Natakgalu*, Bangalore: Directorate of Kannada and Culture, Govt. of Karnataka, 2004 (pg62)

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