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RECASTING MODERNITY IN THE NOVEL *INDIRA BAI*

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ABSTRACT
This article, by examining and analysing *Indira Bai* (one of the early novels in Kannada literature), argues that the native intellectual class of India employed the medium of novel not only to critically interrogate their socio-cultural practices in the backdrop of a new consciousness and experiences ushered in by colonial transactions but also to refashion their idea of 'tradition' and modernity. Thus, their response to the colonial 'modernity' was not merely an act of 'civilizing mission' superimposed by the colonial empire but was also an attempt at formulating and framing a narrative of change among the emerging middle class. The paper argues that the postcolonial elite's attempt to homogenise their experiences as victim subjects would be simplistic and misleading as works such as *Indira Bai* go on to substantiate that the dominant social forces used the Western genres such as novel to essentially recast modernity selectively without completely extricating from their native 'tradition'.
Keywords: Colonial encounters, hybridity, Indian novel, mimicry, modernity, social reform, tradition.

One important tendency of the nineteenth century novel in India is its effort to negotiate colonial modernity in different ways. The genre novel itself is a European medium, which emerged during the early phase of industrialisation in Europe owing to the emergence of middle class. This genre was imported to the Indian colony and became popular among the educated Indian middle class Indians. The exposure to a different variety of culture seemed very unreal and strange to the Indian readers whose reading habits were restricted to Classical canonical texts, with very little trace of social realism. Probably no one imagined the role these novels would play on the literary horizons of India and later the larger significance of these mediums on the transformative process of Indian society. By the second half of nineteenth century the influence of these novels was so much that the native writers started mimicking and adopting the medium in the various regional languages of India. This period saw the mushrooming of novels in all the important language traditions of India. The most important part of this experience is an effort by various writers adopting and taking recourse

to the social novel to address the changes that were triggered by colonial modernity. What exactly did the colonial modernity mean to them or how did they perceive the dynamics of change triggered by it makes an interesting account. They fashioned the novel to communicate their responses to their contemporary world.

The emergence of the Indian novel coincided with reformist movement in India triggered by the influence of colonial modernity. The native intellectual class, responding to these changes, attempted to critically interrogate their socio-cultural practices in the light of a new consciousness and experience ushered in by colonial transactions. It was not merely an act of 'civilizing mission' superimposed by the colonial empire. The native intellectual class deemed it necessary to adopt certain European systems of knowledge which they presumed would redress some of the compelling problems of 'tradition' of their times. Even before Macaulay in his recommendation made a case for the establishment of English education in India in 1935, one of the foremost social reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy in his letter to Lord Amherst in 1823 had urged for the introduction of western knowledge disciplines. "...we understood that the Government in England had ordered a considerable sum of money to be annually devoted to the instruction of its Indian Subjects. We were filled with sanguine hopes that this sum would be laid out in employing European Gentlemen of talents and education to instruct the natives of India in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful Sciences, which the Nations of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection that has raised them above the inhabitants of other parts of the world" (*Selections from Educational Records* 98-101). Such pleas could be easily dismissed as the colonised subject having internalised the Eurocentric values or the cheap mimicking of the colonial master, but postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha sees mimicry as "double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (88). Thus, the colonised subject is not all the time a passive, mute imitator. The colonised is learning, transforming and later even reproducing his own idea of individualism, culture and Nation.

Colonial history of India in the later part of nineteenth century saw such rigorous responses in various realms, including literary articulations. This paper is an attempt to trace the impact of colonial modernity as represented in *Indira Bai* (1899) one of the early novels of Kannada literature written by Gulvadi Venkat Rao. The novel locates itself in the dynamics of social change and attempts to construct an idea of modern womanhood, religion, science, culture, and community identity. The novel essentially addresses issues concerning Saraswath Brahmins and tries to reform the community on modern lines. The idea of 'modern', though influenced by the colonial version, doesn't completely comply with its framework. In the process they imagine, invent and construct their own variant of modernity, which would also suitably accommodate their 'past grand legacies'.

The Saraswath Brahamins were employed as Karniks (Accountants, scribes, and clerks in the royal court) during Keladi period and later took to trading and attained relative prosperity (Paddikal, Colonial Modernity and the Social Reformist Novel 215). They were one of the early beneficiaries of colonial education in Karnataka. Gulvadi Venkat Rao himself was a police official of those times and fairly a well informed man. Observing the sorry plights of widows in his community and to caution people on the superstitious practices, he took to writing social novels with reformist fervour. The genre itself was new to the Kannada language and to the reading public. Indira Bai, the protagonist of the novel, becomes a widow at a very young age even before her marriage is consummated. Her doting parents force ritualistic practices of traditional widowhood like denying her usual good food, clothing, cosmetics and various other basic comforts. She is not even allowed to venture out and interact with people socially. The whole situation not only becomes tormenting to her but also incomprehensible for her young mind. On one occasion a group of religious saints visit her house at the invitation of her father Bhima Rao and during their stay the leader of the group unsuccessfully tries to sexually exploit her. Even the parents do nothing to redress her problem except for advising her to be a good, obliging widow. Finally, she escapes from home and is sheltered by a progressive reformist lawyer Amrit Rao and his wife Jalajakhshi, who educate her and later even perform her marriage with Bhaskar Rao, who is educated in England and later takes up a job as the district collector of Kamalapura .This becomes a cause of consternation and generates opposition by the parents of Indira Bai and the conservative society at large.

The pathetic condition of widows and widow remarriages during this phase of colonial interaction became a rallying point for most of the regional literatures of that period. *Kanyshulkam* by Gurajada Appa Rao(1897) in Telugu, *Kamala (*1894) by Krupabai Satthianadhan in English, *'Yamuna Paryatan'* (1857), by Baba Padmanji Mulay in Marathi, and in Bengali Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's *Vishvriksha, Krishnakanter Uil* , Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali, Gora, Chaturanga and Jogajog* and Saratchandra Chandra's *Pathanirdesh, Shubhada, Charitraheen, Shesh Prashna, Srikanta* to name a few, deal with theme of widowhood. Interestingly most of these novels represent the upper castes and at times even centre on Brahmin castes reacting to the challenges and crisis of change ushered in by colonial modernity. As argued by Shivarama Padikkal 'not all groups at all times produce artefacts which are classified as culture' and that 'literary production is one of the modes by which the dominant constructs its reality and history' (Padikkal, Inventing Modernity 220). These dominant groups, through the process of literary production, were not only self-reflecting on their transformed identities but also were formulating a narrative of change in the public space.

It's interesting to note that the nineteenth century England was witnessing a sea change in terms of womanhood, feminity and man-woman relationship. Eminent critic Meenakshi Mukherjee, citing Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel,* says "Around the time the novel emerged in English, the relationship between the sexes was undergoing a change. The concept of romantic love displacing that of courtly love and marriage was slowly becoming a matter of individual choice rather than familial obligation" (Mukherjee,69). On the contrary the women in India were married of as children even before they reached puberty by the parents within their castes. Men-women interactions among the upper castes were restricted. In case of widowhood, their lives would be doomed. The modern novel in India took its shape and theme under such circumstances. Colonial transactions and the positional superiority of the empire prevailed upon the native traditions to transform and evolve. This modern response is weaved into the narrative of the novel. *Indira Bai* doesn't only restrict itself into issues of women's education and widow remarriage but extends its canvas into mocking at false, hypocritical, superstitious religious practices of the Saraswath Brahmins. Gulvadi Venkat Rao attempts to purge the negative traits of Brahmin order and at the same time proposes to construct an idea of true religion (Saddharma) by rationalizing it on the basis of reason. He doesn't completely reject the religious ethos to which he belongs or does not even remotely toy with the idea of converting to other religions, Christianity for instance which had a significant presence and influence in his area. As stated by Shivaram Padikkal "In his text he puts the Saraswath community as well as certain practices of modernity through a 'rigorous moral review'. According to him truthfulness and honesty are quintessential qualities of life, which should be valued" (Colonial Modernity and the Social Reformist Novel 218).

Orientation of native Indians towards western sciences during the colonial phase of history among the masses is riddled with confusion, as the novel exemplifies. Western medical sciences were associated with the colonial project and were considered impure as they belonged to meat eating outsider's i.e. Englishmen. The instance of adapting to modern English medicine, perceptions and suspicious about it also make an interesting account in the novel. People's introduction to western medicinal system is not only hilarious in the novel; the author even ridicules people who are opposed to it and poigently portrays the death of Vittalaraya, the husband of Indira Bai. When Vittalaraya contacts disease due to excessive indulgence in promiscuous behaviour and seriously falls ill, the family deliberates on the type of treatment to be administered. They, being suspicious of modern medicine of the mlecchas as polluting, depend on local pundits, who were quakes, to cure the sick. They see western medicinal system as essentially devised by the Christian priest to pollute them. Indira Bai, with tears in her eyes, pleads with her father and her in laws to save the life of her husband by summoning the English doctor, which is dismissed as a naive and infantile demand. Ultimately Vittalaraya dies, suffering without proper treatment. This episode in the novel reflects the type of unscientific orientation prevailing in pre-modern native India and the conflict between the prevailing and the colonial-modern system of medicinal practices. In the process the author tends to privilege the modern scientific practices over the existing ones, which he mocks as spurious. It's interesting to note that in and around the same period in colonial Bengal where the ramifications of modern change were more intense and immediate an attempt to

rationalize and systemise the native medicinal systems of Ayurveda and Unani on scientific disciplinary grounds was attempted with the establishment of All India Ayurveda Mahasammelan in 1907, which is still the apex body of ayurvedic practitioners. Writing about it Partha Chatterjee says "The movement which this organization represented sought to systematize the knowledge of ayurvedic clinical methods, mainly by producing standard editions of classical and recent texts, to institutionalize the methods of training by formalizing, in place of the traditional family-based apprenticeship, a college system consisting of lectures, textbooks, syllabuses, examinations and degrees, and to standardize the medicines and even promote the commercial production of standard drugs by pharmaceutical manufacturers" (Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* 17) . This is classical example of the appropriation of modernity and the reproduction of the same in native terms. The novel doesn't even support any such ideas and the novelist Venkat Rao is categorical in his rejection of native system of medicinal practice, which in the context of the novel appears to be unscientific and non-modern. There is hardly any evidence to show that Venkat Rao was aware of any of these developments.

Gulavadi Venkat Rao is essentially trying to recast modernity selectively without completely rejecting the native life. He is unconsciously charting a course which Partha Chatterjee in a different context has observed that "The forms of modernity will have to vary between different countries depending upon specific circumstances and social practices. .....to assert that true modernity consists in determining the particular forms of modernity that are suitable in particular circumstances; that is, applying the methods of reason to identify or invent the specific technologies of modernity that are appropriate for our purposes. Or, to put this way, if there is any universally acceptable definition of modernity, it is this: that by teaching us to employ the methods of reason, universal modernity enables us to identify the forms of our own particular modernity" (Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* 8-9).

Gulvadi Venkat Rao on the one hand admires the logic of enlightenment reason, which he uses critically to evaluate certain native practices with the intention to modify them, and on the other he seems to do what Partha Chatterjee had said in the context of Indian nationalism "...to fashion a "modern' national culture that is nevertheless not western" (*The Nation and its Fragments* 6). Thus, it may be observed that social novels of nineteenth century India were precisely reflecting and constructing an idea of culture and Nation in hybrid terms.

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