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Re-presenting literary works: Imaging women in parallel and popular Kannada cinema

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Abstract

Any discussion on the status of women necessitates the perusal of its representations either in literature or in cinema. This paper focuses on cinema - a powerful medium which animates thoughts and emotions. The films that we have chosen to study the issues of women are 'Ghatashraddha' by Girish Kasaravalli and 'Phaniyamma' by Prema Karanth. Both the directors are from Karnataka and their movies mentioned above deal with widowhood which had caught the attention of many writers and directors during the seventies. These two films are based on the story and the novel written by U.R. Ananthmurthy and M.K. Indira respectively. Now, the reason for choosing these two movies is not just the theme but also the treatment of it by a male director and a female director. Even though both the films remain quite faithful to their original written versions our is more on the transmutations that the cinematic idiom necessitates and not on the literary works.

Keywords: Women, ritual, Brahmanism

Introduction

It may be film or literature both are creative pursuits which negotiate with the socio political and cultural milieu along with the message that they intend to convey; mere individuals or the messages cannot stand independently without the intertwining of the cultural milieu. But when it comes to the treatment of the subaltern that is woman- a site of contestation, it requires a sensitive treatment as it is a statement on womanhood itself. That is why it becomes even more important to trace the differences in the treatment of the issue of female sexuality by a male director and a female director.

Women in Parallel and Popular Kannada Cinema

'Ghatashraddha' meaning a ritual where death rites are performed for a living person in order to suggest ostracism from society is a film on Brahmanism which makes use of the plot of Yamunakka a young child widow. It may be critiquing Brahmanism which does not cater to either the physical or psychological needs of human beings, but how does the movie answer the conflicting queries which surround woman in general? Is it excusable to exploit the situation of women in order to unravel the evils of the society and leave the problem of the status of women unresolved? Girish kasaravalli seems to be doing this in so many ways in the film. It is obvious right from the kind of background music that he employs for the portrayal of the character of Yamunakka who is made to look like a sinner carrying an enormous amount of guilt just because she has an affair with the schoolmaster of the village. Why should it always be woman when one has to subject the society to catechism? Is it used only to make it more emotional or attractive?

There are men also in the film who negate the rituals but a male writer or a director may not find those violations strong enough to catch the audience or make it sensational. And so they wish to talk through women only to re subjugate them in their artistic venture. 'Ghatashraddha' celebrates the male dominated world where in Yamunakka is constantly being discussed by the men around her and nowhere is she portrayed as a strong or an independent character. She looks helpless, scared and as if being chased by the abhorred rules laid by men. Nowhere does she stop and challenge the obsolete social norms, but remains and considers herself guilty throughout. Yamunakka is a character who wants to live and experience all that is denied to her.

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When she can boldly indulge in an illicit affair why doesn't she exhibit the same boldness when it comes to her pregnancy? Is the woman in her limited only to sexual expression and nothing more than that? She even consents to secretly go through the painful abortive procedure. She can overcome all the inhibitions and come out of her house in the middle of the night to get rid of the blemish. But all these attempts of Yamunakka to live are portrayed as helplessness in the ritualistic male dominated society. There is a deliberate and a contrived attempt to present the shallow Brahmanism for which a woman's inner strength is suppressed.

The conclusion or the last scene of the movie proves the dominance of Brahmanism which overpowers all the human attempts. Yamunakka is weakened in the struggle between tradition and modernity. There is no strength left in her and stands defeated with her shaven head. Nani stops and looks sympathetically at her. Does that mean that Nani who belongs to the next generation will treat women like Yamunakka in a more humane way? Even with this kind of a resolution Girish Kasaravalli is placing the woman at the mercy of men suggesting that she is incapable of solving or rebelling all by herself. In the entire movie Yamunakka remains outside the society, she either remains locked up inside her house or moving around only in the dark and in the forest. Just as the portrayal of her character the issue of womanhood is also not encountered in its full capacity."

'Phaniyamma' a film by a woman director is undoubtedly a restoration of hope and a representation of woman and not a widow which silences all the rituals. Individual wins over the rituals. The title itself is the name of a woman and not the name of a ritual. If 'Ghatashraddha' has Veda mantra ghosha and the scary drumbeats as its background music, 'Phaniyamma' has lively music and also some happy background songs. Even though it is a story of a child widow the film does not treat it as a loss or something sad nor does Phaniyamma remain indoors like Yamunakka. She roams around the entire village and she is a much sought after person by everybody in the village irrespective of class and caste. In fact it is Phaniyamma who laughs at the meaningless rituals and the Brahmin men who violate them. It is she who is skeptical about the matching of the horoscopes for marriage.

Phaniyamma as a young girl goes through the ritual of getting her head shaved and breaking of bangles removing her mangala sutra which is all shown in detail only to state that Phaniyamma grows beyond all these rituals. These rituals get limited to only rituals and never affect an individual's life. Phaniyamma is not just the story of one woman but it is about the different choices that women of different generations make in order to live their lives. If Phaniyamma chooses to serve people, Subbi who is much younger chooses to indulge in an affair and Dakshayini who belongs to the next generation boldly rebels against the ritualistic male dominated society.

Phaniyamma approves of Dakshayini's decision wherein she refuses to go through the same ritual of 'madi' after she loses her husband; instead she has an affair with the brother in law, becomes pregnant and gets married to him. Here is a director- a woman who seems to be concerned and committed to the issues of women. It is not the women who are made to look helpless but the men. There are some similar scenes in both 'Ghatashraddha' and 'Phaniyamma'

where the elderly and important Brahmins of the village decide to question Yamunakka and Dakshayini.

It is here that one notices the difference in the treatment of the issue. Yamunakka remains indoors and refuses to open the door to the enraged Brahmins. She is scared and holds on to Nani for support. The Brahmins announce her punishment and leave the place. Whereas Dakshayini stands face to face and states that she is pregnant and that she is going to remarry also. Shocked and not knowing how to react they call her mad and leave the place without doing anything to her. When Phaniyamma gets to know about Dakshayini's decision her positive response leaves her brother shocked. Surprisingly there is just a gap of five years between the two films. 'Ghatashraddha' was made in the year 1977 and 'Phaniyamma' in the year 1982. Both the movies capture the same Brahminical society in the 1920s, but one looks at the alternative chosen by Yamunakka as an aberration and the other offers alternatives and justifies them also. Writing about "Ghatashraddha" Prof. Manu Chakravarthi opines that

"The destiny of individuals, the very course of individual life, in such a community abandons the notion of 'will' and endorses the supremacy of forces of history. Individual submission, in a complete sense, to the general movement of history is what emerges as the "real experience" of human beings in such societies.....spaces are closed for individuals whose perceptions are different and unconventional" (2007: 74)

But does an artist's commitment towards the society cease at the representation of just the reality? Don't they have to play a responsible role in affecting a change in the thought processes and the consequent actions? "Phaniyamma" undoubtedly is an attempt in proving that there is hope and life beyond the so called reality or truth whatever one may like to call it.

The celebratory dance of the drunkards at the time when Yamunakka is going through the pain of abortion is in sharp contrast with the widow rituals being performed to Phaniyamma. There it looks like the final victory of the man's world but here Phaniyamma in spite of belonging to the same man's world evokes empathy. The wailing of Yamunakka in the background during her ghatashraddha and the innocent questions of the young girl Phaniyamma during performing the rites of widowhood speak volumes about the treatment of the status of women. In Phaniyamma life begins after shaving her head whereas in Ghatashraddha life ends with it. Ghatashraddha situates Yamunakka a young helpless widow in a Brahminical setup where as Phaniyamma creates women who rebel against the codes of the Brahminical set up.

Conclusion

As a conclusive comment one is compelled to recall the words of Mrs Haweis "In women's hands lies the regeneration of the world. Let us go on with our tongues of fire, cleansing repairing, beautifying as we go the pages of the world's history which lies before us." (1982:183).

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