



CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S HISTORY THROUGH FOLK NARRATIVES: A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE KANNADA BALLADKEREGE HARA

Dr. Vidya Maria Joseph, Assistant Professor

Government First Grade College, Birur, Karnataka

ABSTRACT: *Kerege Hara, a folk ballad which is an important cultural text in the Kannada consciousness is taken up for interrogation in this article. The article probes the construction of the idea of womanhood in the Kannada consciousness and the important role played by oral narratives in this construction. It also interrogates the received notions of 'submissive acceptance' by women and tries to understand how these texts aided in the internalisation of feudal-patriarchal values among women.*

KEYWORDS: Oral Narratives, Folk Literature, Historiography, Construction, Gender, Re-Memory, Context, Human Sacrifice, Silence, Sati.

One of the most exciting areas of interest in the discipline of history during the latter part of the 20th century has been the expansion of the notion of archival material to include oral narratives and folk literature. New historicists and sub-altern thinkers broke new ground when they insisted on the importance of people's unwritten narratives as authentic historical material. Over the past three decades the understanding that people's memories can be a repository of knowledge about the development of the human condition has taken deeper roots and research into the history of communities of people has intensified. Historiography has taken on fresh challenges head-on and the canon of historical and archival material has gradually but steadily expanded and has become more inclusive. The feminist argument that mainstream historiography was male-centric suppressing the real contribution of women to the construction of history and thereby of society has found resonance in multiple academic disciplines. Though there have been voices of dissent to the feminist argument¹, by and large the argument for a more inclusive narrative of history has found favour. In this context, it is essential to understand that oral literature and folk literature can provide very important insights into not just the construction of historiography but also to the understanding of patriarchy and of the



development of the women's consciousness. As Martha Rose Beard points out, "oral history is a highly distinctive example of historical narrative-making, created by 'ordinary' people and contextualised by the professional historian, providing us with a fascinating alternative to constructing and imagining 'histories' beyond more conventionally understood 'texts'." ⁱⁱ This exercise of understanding oral history and thereby reconstructing the lived histories of a community of people whose presence has been ignored by mainstream history is therefore not just exciting but is also an academically challenging work. It is essential for the historian concerned to understand the unique historical and cultural context in which the oral narrative has taken birth and has been nurtured. Contextualising might prevent pigeon-holing oral narratives in convenient ready-made universalist frameworks and will help in a better understanding of the plurality and diversity of the lived experiences of people.

Oral history stands as a dynamic and invaluable form of historical archive, capturing the lived experiences, perspectives, and memories of individuals and communities. Unlike traditional written records, oral history offers a unique lens into history, providing intimate insights into personal narratives, emotions, and cultural contexts.

One of its primary functions is to preserve marginalized voices, ensuring that the stories and experiences of those historically overlooked or excluded from mainstream narratives are documented and remembered. Through oral narratives, historians gain access to firsthand accounts of events and experiences that may not have been recorded in written sources, filling gaps in the historical record and enriching existing narratives. Moreover, oral history serves to preserve cultural heritage by documenting oral traditions, folklore, and customs passed down through generations. By recording these narratives, historians safeguard cultural practices at risk of being lost or forgotten. In challenging dominant historical narratives, oral history amplifies marginalized voices and offers alternative perspectives on historical events and processes. By incorporating diverse viewpoints, it enriches our understanding of history and encourages critical reflection on past interpretations. More importantly, oral history engages communities in the documentation and preservation of their own histories through participatory projects.



Collaborative efforts between historians and communities foster a sense of ownership and empowerment, ensuring that local voices are heard and valued.

Ultimately, oral history serves as a valuable resource for scholarly research, providing primary source material for historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and other researchers. Oral testimonies offer rich data for analyzing social, cultural, and political phenomena, contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship.

In this paper, I intend to understand if folk literature can point us to the real lived histories of women and of the possibility of the reconstruction of the history of women's experience by means of imaginatively, to use Toni Morrison's term 'rememorying the past'. Women in the Kannada communities are subject to multiple hierarchies of which patriarchy is just one. There is a pervasive influence of ancient Sanskrit texts like Manu Smriti or *Manav Dharma Shastra*- which does see woman as equal to 'devta' ⁱⁱⁱbut also has numerous verses which are derogatory to women.^{iv} Similarly the Vachanas of Sarvajna^v which are quoted like universal truths in everyday life of Kannada speaking people has a whole section which is aimed at keeping women in their place. The belief that women are the property of the family to which they are married to remains pervasive and ingrained among most sections of Kannada society even in the first part of 21st century.

In folk culture a majority of the deities are female and are worshipped as 'shakti' – the embodiment of strength. In real life however, the freedom enjoyed by women is circumscribed by the 'maryade' or family honour of which traditionally women become the repositories.

One of the most interesting and tragic folk ballad in Kannada – which has made its way into text books – is *Kerege Hara* (literally 'offering to the tank'). The ballad talks about the construction of a tank by Mallanagowda of Kallanakeri. However, though the construction of the tank is complete, it remains empty of water. Despairing, the Gowda calls the astrologer and asks him to suggest a way to fill the tank up with water. The astrologer consults his charts and tells the Gowda that the only way that his wish could be fulfilled is by offering his eldest daughter-in-law as sacrifice to the 'kere' ^{vi}(tank). The upset Gowda and his wife consult each other and decide that the youngest daughter in law, Bhagirathi, should be offered to the 'kere'



as offering/sacrifice. While there was no question of consulting Bhagirathi about the sacrifice, there is also the conspiracy of silence which is maintained in the family – with nobody openly telling Bhagirathi of the fate that awaits her. However, Bhagirathi knows that this is what is planned for her and is visibly distressed. Her husband Mahadevaraya is away fighting a battle. Unable to confide with anybody and desperately needing to talk to her parents, Bhagirathi seeks permission to visit her parents' home. The mother in law assents and tells her to return quickly.

“Mother, I shall to my home of birth, go”

“Go in speed, my dear, come in haste, my dear”.^{vii}

When Bhagirathi makes it to her home, her parents surprised at her sudden visit, individually ask her if she is alright.

“Bhagirathi that never came, why did you come today?

Why is your face forlorn, why these tears in your eyes?”

It is interesting to note that Bhagirathi is not able to speak to them openly. Instead she states that her in laws have decided to ‘keep her separately,’ The parents tell her that they will provide her with material necessities if she is separated from her household. Bhagirathi refuses. Her sister asks her if she should send her children along with Bhagirathi – indicating that Bhagirathi is as yet childless. Refusing this offer as well, Bhagirathi visits her friend and finally confides in her that she is to be sacrificed to the ‘kere’. Her friend advises her to accept her fate because women have to ‘do as they say.’

And so the youngest daughter-in-law, Bhagirathi

Went to her friend and saw her at the door.

‘Why these tears as never before?’

“Tell you with fear, tell you with fright”

“Tell me without fear and fright”

“My in-laws want to make a feast,

A feast, a feast of me for the well”

“And so it be, do as they say.”

The Bhagirathi who returns is a changed person – resolute and calm as she prepares for



the fate that awaits her. On the day of the sacrifice a feast is prepared. Bhagirathi sits down to clean the lentils and weeps silently. The father-in-law who sees her crying asks her. ‘Why do you weep, Bhagirathi, as never before?’ The conspiracy of silence continues and Bhagirathi replies that a stone from the lentils got into her eyes. This refusal to name the terrible fate that awaits her is oppressive and tragic. It is interesting to notice how this silencing takes place in different contexts. In her seminal essay ‘Site of Memory’ Toni Morrison refers to the slave narratives which deliberately skimmed over the horrors of slavery, by ‘drop(ping) a veil over (these) proceedings too terrible to relate.’ The task for the writer who belongs to any marginalised community therefore, according to Morrison, is to discover how ‘to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.”’ This is important because ‘..we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.’^{viii} This is exactly the predicament of Bhagirathi who is not consulted, or told or even allowed to acknowledge openly her brutal sacrifice to the ‘kere.’ She has been reduced the status of an animal whose consent is not sought before it is slaughtered.

The preparations are over and the mother in law asks her daughters in law to have a bath to prepare themselves. All the other four daughters-in-law refuse to have a bath. Bhagirathi silently has the ritualistic bath and gets ready. The family leave for the ‘kere’ where the feast is served.

They offer the feast to the water goddess. A long quote at this point is necessary:

Offered her food and all of them ate,
All of the ate and the remaining they packed,
They packed and carried the golden basket,
Carried the basket but the gold plate they forgot.
“Go you, Gangavva, go you, Gauravva.”
“Not me,” said Gangava, “Not me,” said Gauravva.
“Go you, Ningavva, go you, Neelavva.”
“Not me,” said Ningavva, “Not me,” said Neelavva.



“Go you then, Bhagavva, my youngest daughter-in-law:

And so she walked briskly to the well,

Briskly to the well and took the plate,

She climbed a step and the water came up.

She climbed two steps and the water touched her feet.

She climbed three steps and the water touched her knee

She climbed four steps and the water touched her waist

She climbed five steps and the water drowned her.

The youngest daughter-in-law Bhagirathi

She became a feast for the well.^{ix}

Her husband Mahadeva Raya has a nightmare and rides back on a naked horse to check on his family. Not finding his wife at home and after being told that she is in her parents' place he rides again to find her. Ultimately it is the friend who tells him what really happened to Bhagirathi. Mahadeva Raya, by throwing himself into the 'kere' is overturning the accepted notions of masculinity and patriarchy. While the 'sati' system demanded a sacrifice of the wife, here the husband without any cultural or societal compulsion, voluntarily joins his wife in death, thereby questioning and rejecting the all-powerful feudal-patriarchal society of his times.

The story of Bhagirathi is a very important part of the Kannada consciousness. Apart from being taught as a poem/song in schools, there are many adaptations of the story in film and theatre as well. Bhagirathi is portrayed as the ideal daughter/daughter -in-law who sacrificed herself selflessly to uphold the family honour and that of the village. This deification is similar to the ones made of many women who underwent 'sati'. In fact, thousands of 'mastikallu's or 'maha-sati kallu' (stone inscriptions) can be found in all parts of Karnataka celebrating and commemorating the ultimate sacrifice of the woman at her husband's pyre. This deification and commemoration have cemented the internalisation of the patriarchal value system which underlines the importance of the woman's silence and consent to any/all sacrifices that may be asked of her. This overarching patriarchal demand for the woman's consent can be seen all across the Indian sub-continent. Folk art and literature along with cultural practices were some of the means through which this consent was obtained.



Kannada critics who wrote about this ballad in the 80s were inclined to follow the same pattern of praising the selfless sacrifice of Bhagirathi while also pointing to the inevitability of the action keeping in view the demands of the ‘cultured, polite society’ of the times.^x However, one critic makes an important intervention and points to the blind superstitious practices which underlined such customs and comments that when a system demands the sacrifice of an individual for the dubious welfare of the collective society, it needs to be questioned and not celebrated.^{xi} A similar point of view is also expressed by Mogalli Ganesh who points out that the feudal system of the middle ages was so powerful and so overarching that the most vulnerable victims of this system never had a chance of raising their voice.^{xii} The violence which is inherent in this system where caste/class/gender hierarchies converge together to victimise and subjugate the woman should not be underestimated. The system renders Bhagirathi silent by not giving her the agency of even talking openly about her coming death by denying her the right to know about the ultimate sacrifice that is demanded of her.

She is aware that she is to be sacrificed and this awareness is given to her indirectly. Throughout the ballad we notice that she does not even have the freedom to mourn openly for herself. Her silence and her pretence that there is something in her eye when her in-laws catch her weeping should not be seen as weakness and victimhood but should be indicative of the very real and completely powerless situation in which Bhagirathi was placed. She realises the inevitability of the coming tragedy when she goes to her natal home. Her swift retreat from her in-laws house to her natal house is very significant and raises important questions about her reasons for doing so. The dismissive response of her family when she states that her mother in law will ‘keep her separate’ cements this sense of inevitability which solidifies when her friend advises her to accept her fate.

Monika Kropelj, an authority on Slovenian ethnology points out that the folk narratives of offering human sacrifice at the site of constructions/wells/tanks can be seen in many parts of the world. However, trying to locate a gender angle to these sacrifices may not be fruitful because there have been instances of child sacrifice, sacrifice of brother and sister apart from young women.^{xiii}



While this might seem like a rational explanation, one cannot rule out the cultural ramifications of the folk narratives on the everyday lives of ordinary people in real time. The development of a distinctive cultural ethos has deep roots in the socio-religious practices that emerge within a community over a period of time. Consequently, folk narratives of sacrifice which can be found in many parts of the world – while sharing similarities also develop distinctly unique characteristics in different geographical locations. In *Kerege Hara*, there is a vast continent of what is unsaid and therefore deliberately unacknowledged.

Toni Morrison through her novels has explored oral history and tries to ‘rememory’ the lived lives of ordinary black people in America. She argues that when a community of people have been violently silenced and when their narratives also fall silent on ‘things that are too horrible’ to remember, the responsibility of reconstructing their lived lives falls on the present generation and they can do this through the ‘act of imagination’ and by ‘rememory’. Perhaps it is necessary for us to return to folk narratives so abundantly available in our local languages to understand the oppressive reality of women’s lives and reconstruct their narratives to fill the ‘gaps of memory’.

Kerege Hara refuses to render itself to easy readings due to the multiplicity of voices within it. It remains an open text – rendering Bhagirathi as an ambivalent symbol of womanhood.



ⁱIn her 1994 book ‘Who Stole Feminism?’ Chirstina Hoff Sommers argues strongly against the attempt to mix education with ideology. Sommers finds the concept of ‘Her-story’ misguided and felt that seeing ideology in history would negate the discipline and would be an impediment to progress.

ⁱⁱ Rethinking Oral Histories: A Study of Narrative Performance, Martha Rose Beard.

ⁱⁱⁱ 3/56 of Manu Smrithi. The Smrithis of Manu have come under severe criticism from sub-altern groups for upholding the hegemony of the upper castes. This ancient text is filled with contradictions and ambivalent ideas about women and their roles in society. Flavia Agnes calls it a complex commentary from the women’s rights perspective.

^{iv} See Manu Smrithi 2/213, 2/214, 2/215

^vSarvajna, a wandering poet philosopher of the 16th century is revered in the Kannada speaking communities and his three line poems -tripadis – are quoted in everyday life. His popularity and reach is immense and he is part of the oral, folk and literary traditions of Karnataka. His popularity also resulted in several anonymous poets using his signature Sarvajna to express their own beliefs. Scholars have tried to sift through the thousands of Vachanas of Sarvajna. Renowned scholar L Basavaraju’s edition of *Sarvajnana Vachanagalu* carrying 937 vachanas is now considered as authentically Sarvajna. It is important to keep the cultural context in view while quoting these texts. Sarvajna’s tripadis on ‘Neeti Niyama Paddati’ and ‘Vehsya Paddati’ have some very harsh indictments against prostitution, lazy women, young women etc. There is no doubt that he added to the culture of prejudice and stereotyping of women.

^{vi} ‘Kere’ in Kannada refers to a vast expanse of water – it can refer to a pond or a lake or a man-made tank. The translation of the ballad which has been used in this article has used the word ‘well’ to refer to ‘kere’. The ‘well’ has another word in Kananda ‘bhavi’ and does not carry the meaning suggested in the ballad. I will use the original word ‘kere’ in the article.

^{vii} The translation that has been used in this article is that of noted Kannada scholar K V Thirumalesh. The translation first appeared in Anikethana in 1989, No 2-1 (April-June 1989) 35-38

^{viii} See Toni Morrison, *Site of Memory*, page 91. In this seminal essay written just before the publication of Toni Morrison’s path-breaking novel *Beloved*, Morrison clarifies several issues on reclaiming black history, especially those who have been left unsaid and therefore unheard. Women’s lives are of particular interest to Morrison. She comments on how even the published slave narratives were silent on the horror and violence of slavery. Imagining the lives of these slaves and rebuilding these lives, for Morrison, is important.

^{ix} Tirumalesh uses the word ‘well’ for ‘kere’.

^x See T.N. Srikantaiah ‘Kerege Hara – A tribute’ collected in *The Walled-up Wife: A Casebook*, edited by Alan Dundes, 1996.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} See Mogalli Ganesh, ‘Balidanada Kavyakke Daniyadavaru’. Mogalli raises pertinent questions about the feudal/caste-ridden/patriarchal set up of the Kannada world and points to how Mahadeva Raya, the youngest son might well have been an adopted son from the lower classes, which in turn might have resulted in Bhagirathi being the first choice for the sacrifice.

^{xiii} See Monika Kropiej, ‘Folk Storytelling between Fiction and Tradition: The Walled-up Wife and Other Construction Legends’ in *Studia Mythologica Slavica* XIV 2011, 66