

Girish Kasaravalli's Three Women : Reflecting Women's Suffering, Redefining Cultural Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Drawing inspiration from Italian neo-realism and the Navya literary movement, Filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli has made remarkable contribution to the Indian New Wave Cinema, both in thematic concerns and aesthetic sensibility. Girish's work bear ample testimony to his indomitable spirit of experimentation with the film form and content. Further, Girish's works have women-centric narratives that expose the negative shades of patriarchal system. This paper will explore the characterisation of three of his women protagonists from films - *Thayi Saheba*, *Hasina* and *Gulabi Talkies*, and their struggles against patriarchal order.

Introduction

The filmmaker spins the yarn of Kannada cinema with celebrative passion and single-minded dedication, salubrious novelty and lofty ideals. Time and again, he has hit the silver screen with surprising charm of his humane characters, the lives they bring on themselves and the lives that the external world imposes on them. His is a dynamic cinematic space which evolves in a vibrant dialogue or exchange with the literary, theatre, and essentially, social movements. And his works are deeply rooted in its cultural milieu and sensitive to its socio-political surroundings.

Unfortunately, Kasaravalli is one of the most neglected great directors of our times. Though his film *Ghatashraddha* is the only Indian film to have featured in the Paris Cinematheque's list of 100 best films of 100 years of world cinema and is ranked at 56, he has hardly received the due recognition in his own soil. His film *Kanasembo Kudureyanneri* has bagged NETPAC Jury award as the best Asian film of 2010 at the Asiatica Film Mediale Film Festival of Rome. In 2009, he has been awarded South Asian Cinema Foundation's 'Excellence in Cinema' Crystal

Globe Award 2009 at United Kingdom, the citation of which states that ***his films right from Ghatashraddha to Gulabi Talkies have mirrored the social conflicts in the six decades of Karnataka.***

While many of his films have gone around the international film festival circuits and have romped international awards, at home he is a victim of the politics of film exhibition. For instance, when he made *Dweepa* on the lives and sentiments of people who were trying to brave odds against evacuation for large dams he had to struggle a lot to release it in theatres. To ease the situation, the lead actress and producer Soundarya, who was then at the pinnacle of stardom in South, bought the distribution rights and yet the film had to wait for nearly two long years to be released only in a mini theatre in Bengaluru.

There have been disgraceful arguments that his films should not be considered for State awards as he is a National Awardee for “it was not fair on the part of Ph.D holders to compete for Pre-University exams.” Such hostilities and insults are not far and few for the director, they have been endless. Still, he has kept his spirits high, never let his conscience sink, and trudged this lonely path. In this sense, he is, truly, the one who is “*Riding the Stallion of Dreams,*” as the title of one of his film goes.

Ever since the emergence of new wave cinema there has been a deliberate ploy on the part of the commercial industry to project all art films as dull, serious and lacking in entertainment and hence, not catering to the “tastes” of audience. His debut film, *Ghatashraddha*, in the mid-70s, proved this as a false propaganda. It not only played in the theatres for 80 days, but was houseful for nearly 60 days. His next film *Aakramana* played houseful for 50 long days in many theatres. However, the fast shrinking of cinematic exhibition space for such films has rendered his films inaccessible to public. Around 2004, when he made *Gruhabhanga*, a teleserial based on S L Bhyrappa's novel, there was an overwhelming response from the audience. Harnessing the same cinematic approach to the serial, he rose to immense popularity and became a household name in Karnataka. This only signifies the audience receptivity for sensible stuff provided they have an opportunity to do so.

Crossing the Boundaries

His journey into film-making started in 1977 with his debut film *Ghatashraddha, The Ritual*. The film, based on eminent literateur U R Ananthamurthy's short story, revolves around Yamunakka (Meena Kattaki), a young Brahmin widow in an agrahara and Nani (Ajit Kumar), a little boy, who has joined gurukula and stays with Yamunakka. The story is narrated through the child's witnessing of the happenings in Yamunakka's house and the agrahara. Yamunakka and teacher Upadhyaya fall in love; she becomes pregnant and to avoid scandal she aborts the child. Enraged agrahara Brahmins decide to punish her with the ritual of excommunication for this transgression. Her father, Old Udupa, performs the ritual – death rites on Yamunakka, who is still alive. The gurukula is left with no pupils and a proposal waits for Old Udupa to marry a 16-year old girl. In the backdrop of the heightening pitch of drum beats, Yamunakka's agony and suffering during the abortion is a disturbingly memorable scene.

Kasaravalli in his deft portrayal of Yamunakka's silent suffering, questions the different values that the Brahmin community prescribes for men and women. While widowed Yamunakka is ostracized for seeking sexual gratification, the old Udupa, has the prospects of getting into wedlock, that too with a little girl setting the ground for another Yamunakka. And the growing little Nani, unlike the adults, is traumatized at Yamunakka's plight, but is helpless.

Without her knowledge, Yamunakka, through her naïve transgression, shakes the patriarchal power and domination of the Brahmin orthodoxy. From being a desireless, domesticated and desexualized self to seeking sexual pleasure and male company in the suffocating atmosphere of rigid social restrictions, which forbids widow remarriage and abjures male company for widows, Yamunakka has threatened the very basis of the institution of marriage, family and Brahminism, and in a broader sense, patriarchy itself. This is why she is punished with the extremely humiliating and dehumanizing excommunication from the family, the caste and the village. This theme of women's sexual freedom vis-a-vis the male-dominated society's tenacious control over women's sexuality runs through many of his films. In *Thayi Saheba*, *Hasina* and *Gulabi Talkies*, he has exposed the different shades of patriarchal society's mindless sanctioning of sexual liberties for men while women are either entrapped in the system or get punished for crossing the boundaries of family.

The Home and the World

The narration of *Thayi Saheba* begins in the mid 40s, pre-independence period. Narmada/Thayi Saheb (Jayamala), is the second wife of Appa Saheb (Suresh Heblkar), a landlord, a committed freedom fighter and an ardent follower of Gandhi. Appa Saheb is released from jail on a parole. To Thayi Saheba's disappointment he visits his mistress Chandri's house. He returns home completely preoccupied with the nationalist politics to take any notice of her longing or sexual desire.

In this film, the inner and the outer worlds, 'Ghare-Bahire', are two distinct worlds – where, in the later, Appa Saheb is jailed and released, every now and then. Thayi Saheba, in the inner world, is permanently imprisoned within Wade, a huge fortress like house. Here is a committed leader, whose blood boils for freedom. He can grieve for Gandhi's worries about partition but when Thayi Saheba is aggrieved of being all alone he finds her to be a selfish woman engrossed with her domestic concerns. He passionately articulates his views of freedom and Swarajya in his writings and in nationalist struggle. However, in his personal life, he is completely devoid of any sensitivity toward Thayi Saheba's feelings or the other women in his life and never gives a second thought to his feudal, autocratic behaviour.

All three women in Appa Saheb's life suffer enormously - frustrated in life, Akka Saheba, his first wife, has withdrawn herself into ascetic life and dismisses all else as illusion; Thayi Saheba has neither a role in any decisions of the Wade nor has any fulfillment in the family life; Chandri, as a mistress, has no good reputation in the society.

Tired of her long-drawn solitudes during Appa Saheb's frequent imprisonments, she feels she doesn't want this freedom. Thayi Saheba's insulation from the entire process of nationalist movement renders freedom as not only meaningless to her, but leaves her painfully exploited. On August 15, 1947, Appa Saheb, about to be released from jail, sends orders for her to prepare large quantity of sweets. All the villagers are asked to assemble in front of the Wade. The purohit, who has to fix an auspicious time for the ceremony, asks Thayi Saheba, what function they were preparing for in the midnight. She replies, "do these men ever tell anything to women?" On the one hand, this shows the subordinate status of women in the family and on the

other, critiques the freedom struggle as being a patriarchal game and hence, not reaching out to common women and/or having any consequence in their lives.

Alongside, it is a sad commentary of Gandhian framework that only challenged the colonial rule and not the feudal system. The film subtly shows that Gandhism has by and large safeguarded politics as a male bastion and did not pay any heed to the women's oppression within the precincts of family.

Through the character of Appa Saheb, Kasaravalli sensitively captures the paradox of the vehement followers of Gandhian ideal of non-violence in the independence struggle themselves being the perpetrators of various forms of violence in the domestic sphere, showcasing that Gandhian non-violence did not foray beyond a means of protest to become an ideal in life. It was merely a strong weapon in the hands of national patriarchy to dethrone colonizers. Further, it raises questions about the fractured nature of nation's imaginary, which limited its scope to territorial sovereignty alone, and did not extend itself to all spheres, especially domestic sphere and constructs a counter discourse to the mainstream historiography.

Several incidents in the film expose Appa Saheb as a perpetrator of mental violence on Thaiy Saheba, Chandri and Akka Saheba. His indifference makes the womenfolk feel grossly violated. For instance, when Thaiy Saheba expresses her displeasure over adopting Nanu without consulting her, Appa Saheb replies, "I never felt that I should ask women and decide anything." Despite having two daughters from Chandri, he adopts Nanu, Akka Saheba's brother Venkoba's son, for he needs a male heir to carry forward his legacy. With every episode of such indifference, the protagonist Thaiy Saheba grows stronger and sensitive. She embodies equality in its truest sense, unlike Appa Saheb.

Thaiy Saheba harbours no ill feelings for Akka Saheb or Chandri. She empathises with their suffering and shares a cordial relationship. This aspect of their unity and solidarity brilliantly shines through the entire length and breadth of the film. In one of the most heartening gestures, Thaiy Saheba sends word for Chandri when Appa Saheb returns from jail with a broken leg, after getting involved in the struggle against Princely States in independent India. Breaking the age-old tradition of Wade, she lets Chandri, a lower caste woman, inside the house and allows her to spend time with Appa Saheb. Venkoba advises Thaiy Saheba to take advantage of the situation

to win over Appa Saheb and avoid Chandri. But Thaiy Saheba replies, "I can't be as calculating as you. I felt the woman shouldn't suffer."

Interestingly, Thaiy Saheba doesn't hesitate a single bit to entrust herself on Chandri when the need arises. While the Tenancy Act is in the anvil, the landlords unite and refuse to distribute lands against Appa Saheb's wishes. Appa Saheb is branded as a communist, arrested and goes missing. As Venkoba refuses to intervene, Thaiy Saheba, who has never stepped out of the Wade, befriends Chandri and goes to jail in search of Appa Saheb. They cannot trace him.

Meanwhile, when Appa Saheb is fiercely involved in political activities his adopted son Nanu and his mistress Chandri's daughter Manjari fall in love. Thaiy Saheba is agitated and resists it. In the fight that ensues between her and Nanu, he dismisses all morality as selfish and begs for freedom from the suffocating desai legacy.

It is a moment of grave complexity, bitter internal struggle and emotional turmoil for Thaiy Saheba. Yet, as time passes she gains her composure, painfully introspects and arrives at the meaninglessness and failings of feudal relationships and norms and all the more consciously resolves to get Nanu his cherished freedom by annulling his adoption and to avoid, most importantly, the creation of new Thaiy Sahebas' and Chandris'. She is prepared to go to any extent, even to jail, for this.

To her dismay she discovers that the institution of police, law, and judiciary are another world of rigid, meaningless codes and regulations and that there is no possibility in the law to annul Nanu's adoption. She signs a false declaration to favour an annulment and anticipates an arrest.

Thaiy Saheba has gradually emerged as a radical being breaking the caste discrimination, the class hierarchy and the patriarchal social order. At the end of the film the woman whose entire identity was the Wade and desai legacy unburdens herself, and also Nanu, of this oppressive, unjust feudal legacy. She forsakes the cultural identity which has unmistakably arisen from a patriarchal need/quarter. She says, don't call me Thaiy or Saheba, call me ma...

Individual Assertion to Mass Resistance

Based on Bhanu Mushtaq's short story Kari Naagaragalu, this film *Hasina* poignantly captures the plight of Muslim women and their growing resistance to violence and oppression. The film

begins with Hasina (Tara), a pregnant woman, arriving with her three girl children to Masjid before Fazr namaaz, morning prayer, and sitting in the entrance. An old gentleman advises her to go home. But Hasina refuses to budge saying, "I will not go without justice." The narrative moves back and forth with the happenings in the Masjid during her dharna and flashbacks of her life as time passes from Fazr to Zohr, Asr, Magrib and Isha, night prayer and the gripping tale is fragmented into episodes and well knit into the interstices of consecutive prayers.

Hasina is pregnant with the fourth child and her husband Yakoob, an autorickshaw driver, is jubilant expecting a male heir till an ultrasound scan reveals otherwise. This unleashes a spate of violence on Hasina, which exposes the extreme subjugation of women in the Muslim society and unfolds the pro-male biases within the community manifested in the preference of male child, divorce procedures and the practice of polygamy. A sensitive director that he is, Kasaravalli, hardly brings the direct scenes of physical assaults on to his frame, but leaves a painful impact with the helpless screams and cries.

Yakoob deserts Hasina and takes shelter with his mother. Her attempts to bring him back fails and onsets new cycle of violence. Bruised and battered Hasina reconciles to this new fate and struggles hard to save money for her blind daughter Munni's operation to regain her eyesight. She complains to Jamaath demanding her entitled Mehar and Iddat money for the purpose.

As the film unwinds one wonders about the extent violence has become integral to our society. From technologies that aid sex determination of foetus to religion everything gives scope for gender discrimination and directly or indirectly perpetrates violence against women. An innocent poor Muslim woman, who is in the margins of the society, has a simple aspiration to get her daughter's vision restored. But, the hate-ridden power politics among the religious authorities, who are supposed to guard the sacred spaces of religion, derails any possible justice to Hasina. As she herself shares with Julekha Begum, who leads her into the struggle, in the fight between Khan Saheb, Muthavali/religious head, and Hanif Saheb, former Muthavali, Munni's life is getting ruined. Taking undue advantage of the political bickering between the two Sahebs, Yakoob plays mischief and puts Hasina in a tight spot. Khan Saheb, who was initially considerate, becomes intolerant towards Hasina and fails to intervene and becomes in a way responsible for Munni's death and Hasina's misery.

Kasaravalli adeptly captures the precarious situation of Hasina, where she can neither get talaq from Yakoob before his remarriage as he doesn't want to give maintenance nor can she exercise Khula as she will lose the maintenance. She has nothing to fall back on and is forced to endure Yakoob's animosity and contempt. The feminist debate on personal laws, especially talaq, being discriminative finds its echoes in the film.

One of the strengths of the film is Hasina is not left alone in the struggle. Educated Julekha Begum, provides guidance, writes petitions and gives her confidence. And there is affectionate Amina Begum, Muthavali's wife, extending warm hospitality when she comes to her door with petitions. When Hasina is in dharna, she braves to provide food to starving Hasina and her kids, fights with Hasina's mother-in-law and rescues the kids from being forcibly evacuated. Even Yakoob's fiancée Zarina promises Munni and her mother, when they request her, that she will demand for Yakoob's talaq and get Hasina's Mehar money for Munni's surgery. Little kids Munni, Shabnam and Habiba too share Hasina's difficulty in many ways. All through the film as the religious authorities suppress Hasina the strong solidarity of the womenfolk doesn't let her spirits extinguish.

Kasaravalli intertwines Hasina's struggle with that of Amina Begum's life highlighting religious head Muthavali is no exception to women's oppression. Despite her progressively deteriorating health after a number of deliveries and nursing, he does not allow her to undergo family planning operation. Muthavali refutes it by quoting Shariat as saying those undergoing operation to prevent conception go to hell where raging fire fries them alive and black cobra stifles them to death. Further, he crushes Amina Begum's effort to get clarification on Shariat on this from Julekha Begum.

The film puts forth the growing resentment among Muslim women about their status in the community, which calls for gender sensitive reforms. Though Hasina's struggle doesn't yield justice, she survives and passes on the baton to other women. Women in the streets, who used to vanish into homes as soon as Muthavali enters as a mark of respect to his authority, resist doing so. The film ends with Amina Begum defying Muthavali and leaving to her maternal home for family planning operation.

The film is exceptional in the way it snowballs individual assertion into a unified protest, which, in turn, offshoots several such individual assertions. The scene where Hasina, shocked by Munni's death, hurls her petitions in air, they fly and reach many women in the neighbourhood, they read them, lift up their purdahs and march to Hasina is awe-inspiring.

Local Talkies, Global Village and the “Trapped Women”

In the backdrop of the advent of globalization and assertion of Hindu fundamentalist forces in Coastal Karnataka, Kasaravalli presents the story of a Muslim mid-wife and a Hindu fisherwoman victimized by these developments. From Vaidehi's short story *Gulabi Talkies*, the director constructs a refreshingly new story in the context of the communally sensitive Coastal belt.

Cinema is her passion, her dream, her life and her world. Living in a fishermen's hamlet, Gulabi, between her menial tasks of mid-wifery, goes to cinema every day. In a dramatic incident, she is literally lifted from a cinema hall for assisting a complicated delivery as she refuses to yield to requests and in exchange of her service she is gifted a colour television and dish antenna, which sets in motion a range of changes in the fishermen community. Beautiful frames of women and children peeping through the windows of Gulabi's hut capture the curiosity and initial hesitation.

The new sensation of satellite television slowly breaks the segregation between Hindu and Muslim women and unites them under Gulabi's roof. This “*Gulabi Talkies*” with regular women-centric soap operas and the mutual exchanges between women, makes way to new dreams, new relationships and a new way of life. Strangely, it unites Gulabi and her husband Moosa, who was living with his second wife. But this peace is shortlived. The sudden disappearance of Nethru, a young Hindu woman, from the hamlet which coincides with Moosa's missing creates furor and renders Gulabi vulnerable.

Paralleling it is the new entry of large vessels of MNCs in Indian shores which play havoc on the lives of poor local fishermen creating large scale resentment and resistance. Local Muslim men become the mediators between the MNCs and the fishermen community. The MNCs disturb the local fishing business by absorbing their workforce, invading their markets and indulging in creating huge price fluctuations and the Muslim middlemen become easy targets to the wrath of the local Hindu businessmen. The simmering trade enmity between the two communities

combined with the jingoistic frenzy and anti-Muslim sentiments unleashed by the Kargil War become the breeding ground for Hindu fundamentalist forces.

The film delicately shows that rumours become the hard currency for the survival of communal forces. Nethru's incident, though not related to Moosa, gets communal hues and few self-styled moral police, spring into action from nowhere, go on a mission to trace Nethru and force her back to the hamlet. Notwithstanding the prospect of staying with her nagging mother-in-law Nethru disappears in the night. The next day, these hot blooded communal hooligans question Gulabi about Nethru's whereabouts and forcibly evacuate her from the hamlet in connivance with local businessmen.

In this film, Kasaravalli deeply delves into the multiple onslaughts faced by women in situations of conflict. Women, as demonstrated by Gulabi and Nethru, are at the receiving ends of oppression in the family, self-centred exploitative politics of local business interests and the fanatic communal outfits. In this world of male politicking, fisherwomen who go hand in hand in balancing the family's economy are denied any spaces to intervene. Though Nethru's and Gulabi's dreams crumble into pieces, Gulabi carries on with the confidence that she can sustain her life as long as women become pregnant, ignorant of the developments in medicine.

Be it Hindu women or Muslim women, patriarchal values and the feudal family institution subjugates them equally. As the patriarchal concept of women's sexual purity is central to the family, community and religion, any woman, like Nethru, who challenges this notion of sexual sanctity and transgresses it, is perceived as a threat to their existence. This, patriarchal framework, in turn, provides a ready platform for communal outfits to take control over women's bodies and lives in the name of protecting honour and women become the victims of the virulent attacks in such communal conflicts. Nethru's victimisation by the communal fascist elements points to the dangerous trend of disciplining women into the traditional confines of family and religion and burying her modern aspirations while Gulabi's victimisation throws light on the extreme vulnerability of innocent minority women in the context of growing saffronisation.

Conclusion

Kasaravalli's protagonists – Narmada, Hasina and Gulabi, are those who have been subjected to different kinds of violence and oppression and seek liberation from this. Narmada of Thai

Saheba, in the politically bustling Northern Karnataka of the period between Gandhi's and Nehru's death, wages an independent struggle. Hasina, of the 80s, witnesses the united protest of Muslim women against the injustices met out to her within the community and offshoots individual assertion. Gulabi Talkies, at the fag end of the decade of 90s in the communally sensitive coastal Karnataka, brings forth the victimization of both Muslim and Hindu women, who challenge the patriarchal values, by the Hindu communal forces as in the case of Nethru and Gulabi, while local business establishments, with their vested interests, silence others from interfering. From Yamunakka to Nethru a full circle is complete - the rigid strangleholds of tradition and religion override women - with a big difference of the new avatar of saffron brigade this time.

Narmada, Hasina and Gulabi are those who not only realize their own pains, their suffering and their loss but they relate to the commonness of their suffering and question and resist in their small and big ways the injustices met to their gender. They are not victims trapped in the whirl of self pity; rather, they harden as diehard spirits who try not only to survive but to find a way forward in any situation. They are those who seek some understanding, some empathy, in the course of which they discover/define their own spaces, identities and purposes in life. And they are those who, in their resistance against exploitation, in their transgressions of rigid norms, in their quest for freedom, have etched the footprints of a feminist path.

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