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Between Illusion and Reality: Subverting Stereotypes

(An Analysis of Two Stories)

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*Associate Professor, Department of English (PG & UG), Sahyadri Arts College, Shimoga, (Karnataka) India***Abstract**

Paradigm shifts have taken place in the field of literary criticism. Texts have become site for ideological and cultural debates. What constitutes cultural reading is a complicated question. Creative writers/ texts sometimes conform to existing values of society. Many other times they interrogate our preconceived notions of truth and reality. The established discourses are strongly scrutinized and articulated issues are problematised. Without taking sides certain texts articulate the complexity of taking theoretical positions. The pre conceived ideological notions are strongly redefined in some texts. This paper analyzes two important and interesting Kannada stories to examine open ended negotiations of two writers- *Vaidhehi* and *Poornachandra Tejaswi*. The analyzed stories prove how certain issues like freedom, Reality, truth and illusion are only subjective constructs and they are superficial narrations.

Key Words: Paradigm Shifts, Truth, reality, discourse, open-ended texts Vaidhehi, Tejaswi, constructs

Introduction:

Can Reading and interpretation be considered two separate categories is a problematic question. Paradigm shifts have taken place in the way in which a literary text is analyzed. From textual criticism to cultural studies the parameters of criticisms have changed. If literature occupied a privileged position in New Criticism the same is rejected in social and cultural theories. Now the notion that literature and literary text is a part of social/ cultural discourse has gained momentum. Entering into the foray of cultural studies gives us an opportunity to look at a text from multi disciplinary point of view. It must always be understood that knowledge cannot be compartmentalized and hence multi disciplinary approach is only a natural means of analyzing a text in question. Many

times it is misunderstood that one can mechanically apply critical theories to literary texts so that our pre suppositions are proved. Creative writing defies such formulaic and easy application of theories. Roughly there are two kinds literary narratives. One is – the writers want to prove their thesis in a text. The other is that the Writers articulate and explore possibilities of meaning rather than fixing it in a text. In this category, any formulaic reading acts as a limiting framework. So it is better to take into considerations of liquidity of meaning and transitory nature of reality in a text.

With this back ground let me analyze two important and interesting Kannada short stories. They are – **A Bird in the Nest** (Gudinolagina *Hakki*) by eminent writer

Vaidhehi and *Mayamriga* (illusory Deer) by a multifaceted writer K P Poornachandra Tejaswi. If the first one was written during 1980es, the latter was a product of early 1990es. The two stories are interesting because of many reasons. One reason is that both of them subvert the orthodox and conventional understanding of literary meaning. Both the stories reject the notion of absolute truth, reality and meaning. Both of them do not subscribe to fixed notion of anything and problematize the very understanding of truth and reality. Again, the stories are extremely opened ended and rather philosophical. They strongly interrogate the accepted values of society and do not give sermon like solution to the problems they articulate. It is said that 'great' stories do not preach but construct discourses. Their 'duty' is not to offer solution but to negotiate. In such negotiations paradoxes, ambiguities and tentative possibilities become part of their narrative structure. Even grand narratives and theories are rejected and new philosophical positions are achieved. If Conventional understanding of feminism is strongly interrogated in the story *A Bird in the Nest*, *Maya mriga* treats truth and reality as mere constructs. Hence both stories are philosophical articulations in paradoxes of theories! Therefore they are interesting and have the potential to break new grounds in literary discourses.

Let me examine how Vaidhehi's story *A Bird in the Nest* breaks new ground in feminist discourse. And let me clarify here itself that the writer never claimed that she is a feminist writer in a conventional sense. She was never comfortable with this

feminist tag to her name. Rather, she stated that she is a women writer foregrounding the experience of women. If critics could locate her stories in feminist parameters, she would not object to it but essentially she was a women writer. This story has unusual subject matter as it interrogates the basic foundation of feminism. The story line is like this: The protagonist (Malathi) is a conventional middle class home maker who wanted to experiment with freedom. She requested her husband to lock her up in her own house before he goes to his office! For this action she did not give any specific reason. The rather reluctant husband agrees to this strange request and does the same. But he warns her that this should not be disclosed to anybody and her presence inside the house should not attract anybody's attention. Now the protagonist starts 'enjoying' her freedom. She changes her dress and wears pant and shirt. (This dress code is usually associated with men and not with married women.) She tries to enjoy her new found privacy by whistling, singing freely. Sometimes she feels like disrobing herself and enjoys nudity. She tries to smoke but hindered by intermittent cough. She goes to bathroom and thinks of taking bath with the doors wide open. But she retracts from this idea as the shower might attract neighbor's attention. She thinks of doing nothing as she wanted but this becomes a boring activity. Like this she goes on experimenting with the idea of freedom. Unfortunately all activities look boring and the story ends with her waiting for her husband to come back and open the door!

Now the above mentioned story problematizes many issues. First of all her request to lock her up in the house goes against the usual feminist discourse. Her house does not become a cage for her. The use of the term cage in English translation is a wrong usage. The correct term is *Gudu* – a bird's nest. Kitchen and four walls are a metaphor for loss of freedom but this story breaks this stereotype. Henrik Ibsen's path breaking play *A Doll's House* treated conventional house and family set up as a cage. The protagonist Nora after realizing that she has become a doll goes out of family life and the thudding sound of the door epitomizes women's world becoming vast and expanding. Many critics correctly argued that the thudding sound of the door was heard all over Europe. In fact in another poem Vaidhehi herself wrote about aspiration of a 'girl in the kitchen'. But here the reversal takes place as the protagonist remains within the domain of private sphere. Then why exactly she had that request is not clear. Her married life was going on well and there seemed to be a harmonious relation with her partner. Was it because of routine life she wanted to experiment? Or did she aspire for entirely new life? Was she unhappy before her request is not clear? Again, the story problematizes the concept of freedom. What actions give her freedom is an important question. She wanted to enter into the domain of men but that does not work well for her. She wanted to enjoy privacy and be herself but that also fails to satisfy her. What is the meaning of freedom is another complicated question. (Does freedom mean smoking or wearing pant and shirt?) The fact that most of her actions fail

to satisfy her once again raises metaphysical question about the notion of freedom. Most of her free actions fail to give her satisfaction and they construct another limiting framework. Here we can see that the protagonist's understanding of freedom rejects universal values and borders on continuous experimentation. Is her waiting for her husband to come back a defeat is another ambiguous issue. The notion of autonomy and private sphere which are important aspects of feminist discourses are interrogated in this story. Thus one can safely say that the narrative breaks the shackles of rigid notion of feminism and attains metaphysical proportions.

Written with unique sense of humor, Poornachandra Tejaswi's story *Mayamriga* (Illusory Deer) once again complicates our notion of truth, reality and meaning. The narrative opens with two characters – the narrator and his friend Shaw- examining whether there is real existence of ghosts in this world. In the beginning both of them were sure that there cannot be super natural creatures as both of them were known rationalists. Their rational and scientific mind was *sure* about the non existence of ghosts and they wanted to *prove* it beyond doubt. For this, they undertook a journey to a deserted cemetery at midnight. As they could not find anything strange, they started thinking about how to disapprove the existence of the ghost. So they begin to use abusive language and call the ghost by its name to come. Still nobody came and they were worried how to disapprove the existence of supernatural creatures. Their whole mind was occupied with ghosts and slowly they started thinking that the ghost

might come in any unexpected form! They started suspecting that it might come in the form of any animal or even a dog! Even natural sound of wind or leaves makes them think about super natural spirits. The story constructs an extra ordinary situation where they suspect each other and the narrator's friend thought that the ghost has come in the form of the narrator himself! They begin to see something strange in everything and surety of their belief pays way for doubt and suspicion. Like this the narrative constructs many hilarious instances where they suspect that it could be a proof of supernatural creatures! The story ends with the return journey to their home in the early hours of the morning. They come back with more doubts than with answers. A sick dog continually following them to their home increases their doubt!

The narrative is not just a comic exploration of existence of ghosts and spirits. Rather, it is a philosophical articulation on the concept of reality, truth and meaning. The so called rational mindset did not allow them to see other possibilities. The narrative is not about blind beliefs and irrational super natural musings. The narrative treats truth and reality as mere subjective constructs. If people believe in ghosts, then their mind imagines lot of witnesses to prove it. If they do not believe it, there are evidences to disapprove its existence. Meaning ultimately is a temporary representation and absolute meaning -as post modernists argue -is impossible. The narrative began with surety of purpose i.e. the narrators were sure of non existence of spirits. But it moves on to uncertainty and doubt. The mind of two characters is full of multiple possibilities. As

they imagined more, the division between illusion and reality becomes more and more blurred. Like the mythical illusory deer in Ramayana, certainty and meaning become illusory. In a brilliant manner the story proves that evidences can be gathered for any suppositions. There can be a number of evidences to prove or disapprove the existence of ghosts. The entire story elaborates on the futility of searching for evidences for our subjective pre suppositions.

Tejaswi's world is characterized by the existence of an uncertain world- a notion later explored by post modernists. He always viewed this world with suspicion, doubt and the element of mystery always fascinated him. Absolute truth or reality was rejected in his representations and there is a scope for multiple representations. In a philosophical way, he has rejected the Egotistical view that man can solve all the mysteries of this universe. The enlightenment Descartean dictum 'I Think, therefore, I am' is rejected in the narratives of Tejaswi. He believed that the continuous exploration of truth and reality is rather tentative and the human effort- with all its possibilities- has its own limitation. Thus, in the celebrated novel *Carvalo*, the attempt to solve the mystery of flying lizard remains an unresolved mystery. When the lizard escapes from the narrator, he proclaims that "let it go anyway". His other novel *Inscrutable Mystery* is characterized by series of paradoxes and ambiguities. For immature but enthusiastic college students, solving female love becomes an inscrutable mystery. Again, in the same narrative, there is a long debate about the nature of the

relationship between literature and reality. Does literature reflect reality or does reality control literary representation is widely debated upon. The story *Mayamriga* (illusory deer) explores transitariness of reality.

To conclude, the two stories are fine examples in subverting stereotypes and artificial conceptual constructions. They are reflective, subversive and rather open ended.

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