

LIVING ‘LIFE’ – AN ELUSIVE REALITY: READING VAIDEHI

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Abstract

This paper intends to study the elusive nature of ‘life’ as seen in the lives of the protagonists of the prolific Kannada writer Vaidehi’s short stories. ‘Life’, refers fundamentally to an existence that is far more than ‘breathing’ or ‘surviving’. It involves an active participation in the process of existing which entitles one to a variety of experiences. When applied to the ‘lives’ of some women depicted by Vaidehi, this description of ‘life’ appears to be rather idealistic, unreal and theoretical, bearing no semblance to reality. Through the analyses of two of Vaidehi’s stories ‘Antarangada Putagalu’ (Pages from the Interior) and ‘Hagalu Geechida Nenta’ (The Man Who Scraped the Day), the paper establishes how with the evolution of the world, when everything of the past has changed in some way or the other, subjugation of women is manifestly the only unchanged old world paradigm. The paper also brings out the fact that this ‘unchanging tradition’ is largely supported by the institution of marriage in India.

Without aspiring to narrate a grand tale Vaidehi picks up little events, inconsequential people, simple but independent thoughts, modest gestures and humdrum themes through which she throws light on the complex web of women’s lives. She attempts to understand the existential realities of her women characters by focusing on the micro levels of their inner life and their everyday experience which is held together by an essential struggle for selfhood and liberty.

‘Life’ is too enormous, multifarious and comprehensive a term to be described by any definition. Several dictionaries of English try to provide numerous practical and theoretical meanings to the word ‘life’. One such meaning is that it is “the active force in animals and plants that makes them different from all other forms of matter, such as stones or machines or dead bodies.” Another meaning is, it is “the state or condition of being alive”. One more definition says that ‘life’ is “existence as a collection of widely different experiences”. Another definition states that life means “active(ity); cheerfulness; vigour” (Longman 604).

One can notice that all the definitions emphasize on ‘being alive’, ‘being active’, and ‘existing’, as opposed to ‘being dead’, ‘being inert’, and ‘not existing’. ‘Life’, then, refers fundamentally to an existence that is far more than ‘breathing’ or ‘surviving’. It involves an

active participation in the process of existing which entitles one to a variety of experiences. When applied to the 'lives' of some women depicted by Vaidehi, a prolific Kannada short story writer, this description of 'life' appears to be rather idealistic, unreal and theoretical, bearing no semblance to reality. Terrorized by the male oriented institutions, relegated to subordination and humiliation by the apathetic social structures and perennially drowned in misery and suffering, woman leads but a 'life' of drudgery, silence, physical and mental trauma and of vulnerability. Some of the stories of Vaidehi are a portrayal of the 'silence' that women take recourse to writhing under imposed norms, domestic violence and sexual harassment. These women, young or old, married or single, rich or poor are all in the confines of social injustice and autocratic customs and are unable to find their way out for them.

Monique Parent Frazee quotes in her article "Ellen Glasgow as Feminist" that feminism, as Glasgow defined it in 1914, is "a revolt from pretense of being . . . a struggle for the liberation of personality." Frazee sees not much change in the idea of feminism in 1950 when Josephine Jessup describes it as "the expression of woman's desire to be herself, that is, to measure attainment irrespective of sexual function" (qtd in Frazee 167). By this stage and after, Frazee notes, feminism came to be concerned with all the aspects of life, not merely demanding economic opportunity or political enfranchisement. Consequently, she observes, "a diversity of movements has mobilized thousands of determined women with a variety of views, objectives, and emphases, as well as new means of action" (167). However, they all converged in their unanimous aim, that is, to see women liberated from male bondage, to see women able to free themselves, body and soul. Although the heroines of Vaidehi seem to be unaware of such movements outside them, they too are engaged in a search for the self in their own personal and diverse ways.

Vaidehi took to writing in the 1970s, considered to be a revolutionary phase in changing the political, social, literary and feminist scenario. Vaidehi's characters belong to the pre and post-independence India and are deeply rooted in their culture, a predominantly Hindu one though, and lead lives dictated by its taboos and expectations. They are so immersed in that cultural atmosphere that nothing beyond that world exists for them. Vaidehi's characters replicate the upper and lower caste Hindu women of the time around India's independence from British rule. This is a significant aspect about her stories as the changes that are taking place in the world around them -- the social reforms, the legal and constitutional rights that are 'granted' to women -- have plainly no relevance to most of the protagonists of her stories. Nonetheless, in spite of being physically and culturally bound by definite surroundings, Vaidehi's women travel far in their psyche through analyzing, questioning, and seeking answers to their hushed questions about their own self. But in the given social environment they mostly end up remaining where they are despite being sensitive to the oppression surrounding them. Vaidehi's fiction is outstanding for the complexity of its characters and her ingenuity in using the colloquial Kannada of a particular region in coastal Karnataka, which is spoken by most of her characters. She creates a world of women who are visible everywhere but are hardly noticed. Her adept use of language makes her narratives read like poetry. To Vaidehi the 'form' is as important as the 'content'. 'How to say' is a serious preoccupation in her writing as she believes in suggestiveness rather than being outspoken. Although her writing seems to flow naturally, she makes conscious choice of words and expressions which make her writing subtle, sensitive and poetic. Noted feminist critic B. N. Sumitrabai has this to say about Vaidehi's writing:

Vaidehi depicts the social situation of women in the way they live their personal lives – she seems to write as though with the consciousness of a

witness.... Vaidehi understands from inside the lives, environment and characteristics of women rather than grasping their experience through ideologies and theories.... In this, she is writing in the tradition of (early and mid-twentieth century Kannada writers) Shyamaladevi, Gauramma and Savitramma. Thus she appears very different from her contemporaries Sara Abubakar, Geetha Nagabhushana, Lalitha Nayak or Banu Mushtaq who are situated within the Bandaaya or Rebel tradition.... Vaidehi gives voice to the hundreds of mute murmurs stifled in women's hearts... (520).

'Antarangada Putagalu' (Pages from the Interior) unravels the different emotions and notions of Achala and the people around her, about marriage. The story begins with Achala's repugnance to marriage at an age when she is just wearing skirt and blouse. However, quite a few reasons are quoted to argue that she is not young for marriage among which one is, "when I was your age, I had children. Grandmother had already become a widow before she turned fifteen" (Sebastian 15).

The sanctity of marriage and family is central to Indian culture and single woman is considered as a threat to that sanctity. The story focuses on an Indian woman's feeling of seclusion and alienation both within and outside marriage. Achala, the protagonist, emerges as a proud young lady without any pretensions, by exploring the shams of contemporary society. Vaidehi takes the reader on a journey into the intricate ways in which patriarchal discursive practices are inscribed in women's minds and bodies. The social pressures weigh heavy on the women characters. The main thrust of the story is laid on the marriage of Achala who harbours romantic illusions about marriage. For her, falling in love is a precious, unique, intimate experience in life. She goes on rejecting the suitors, one after another saying, "I did not see any light in the eyes of even one of them. I did not have the irrepressible desire to bear the child of even one of them" (17).

Achala's mother ridicules the daughter saying that "All that is mere fantasy. Even if you feel that way, it would vanish the day the wedding garland is put around your neck" (17). Achala feels frustrated when her mother describes the futility of such dreams as hers. The mother seems to speak according to her experience of the ineffectuality of women's dreams in the society, and hence dissuades her daughter from treading the path of dreams. Nevertheless, Achala questions, "But how can one get married for the sake of the wedding pandal, the music, the clothes, the jewelry, for the sake of prestige, blessing?" (17). Her aunt Puttathe raises the question of Achala's survival and safety after her parents' death. Achala's answer that she would take up a job and look after herself, is derided as impertinent and audacious.

Vaidehi gives an insightful description of the amusing comments that arise in Achala's mind each time 'a boy' comes to 'see' her. While in the beginning she is one among her friends who are also in the trip to marriage, gradually she witnesses each one of them graduating from a girl to a 'woman' with marriage and children. She is a bystander to the compromises they make in the choice of their husbands and the 'typical' life they lead. Their belief in the need for a woman to have a caretaker is voiced through Manju, one of Achala's friends.

Achala is confounded when the entire society seems to be advising her from every corner, in one way or the other that, "Ultimately, when a woman grows old, she needs a support to lean on -- she needs a walking stick. Ultimately, the meaning of youth and children has to be reduced to this. It is to this central point that we direct our lives..." (17).

Achala reflects over the emotional unkindness and disgruntlement women experience through marriage. Her friend Sarita has married a rich man, who lives in the USA, has fathered

two girl children and is now eager for a male child. To the disappointment of her husband and his family, she gives birth to a girl child again, and that stops her husband from taking her back to USA. Her sexual dissatisfaction is expressed by the elaboration with which Sarita writes to Achala about Manju, their friend, who has illegitimate relations with someone else, as she is averse to her husband. Sarita quotes Manju as confiding in her once, “I was a whore in the company of my husband, but I felt like a human being when I slept with the other man.” Sarita seems to secretly appreciate, envy Manju’s nerve in defying the social mores. Her marriage turns out to be a mockery of conjugal fidelity. Vijaya, another friend of Achala, falls prey to the rituals and customs of domestic life. She is completely absorbed in family life losing all her identity and sense of selfhood. Subbi, an unmarried servant girl gives birth to a child without any discomfiture. Her adultery goes unnoticed in the conservative society as she belongs to low-caste where patriarchal norms are not strictly enforced. Achala longs to have Subbi’s courage but is bound by the moral code even to surreptitiously call Subbi and ask her about how everything happened.

Nothing happens in Achala’s life; it remains plain; no one comes to marry her, let alone the prince of her dreams. Even the mediocre men begin to reject her saying that she is over aged for marriage. The last man to come is Venkatu, who doles out a list of his materialistic achievements before her and expresses his wish to marry a girl like Achala, if at all he marries. Achala asks him skeptically, “Finally you want a girl, just like a fan, fridge, table, utensils, site etc, right?” Venkatu answers nonchalantly, “Why do you say so? What more do modern girls need? Anyhow I am here! You can have two children in a year if you wish” and laughs as though it is a joke. His laughter finds no response in Achala.

After the last man too has walked out from her life, Achala feels that her hunger for a ‘man’s’ touch has died unfulfilled. But to her embarrassment, she recognizes that her mind is lost in the vision of the man Manju chose to sleep with. Achala symbolizes the psychological complexity that isolates women like her from the stereotypes projected by patriarchy. She wants to directly question the existing system of marriage but finds it impossible to break away from it and therefore takes refuge in her dreams that, perhaps, will never be fulfilled.

‘Hagalu Geechida Nenta’ (The Man Who Scraped the Day) is a story of an insensitive, incapable, timid, yet boastful father of five children – two boys and three girls – of whom the boys have left home for good in pursuit of their businesses, and the first daughter is married. The remaining two unmarried girls are enslaved by the coldhearted, authoritarian father who considers them as burden on him. His unreserved distrust and lack of concern for his unmarried daughters is obvious when he says,

I don’t give them much leeway. If I did, they would run away with someone today itself, they’re that sort of girls. Safe because I keep a tight lid on them. Now see, I’ve locked them inside the house before leaving. Otherwise they would be gone by the time I return. And how would I be able to find them again? Ayyayyoo...are these the only girls to have ever come of age? (Niranjana 136).

Instead of putting an end to the hallucinations, trauma, and daydreams of the daughters by getting them married, the father chooses to lock them up. He condemns them imagining that they are licentious, sexy and crazy. He derides them that they are neither educated, nor trained to pursue any career. He brags about the tale of his first daughter’s marriage with a sigh of relief but does not feel responsible for not being able to settle the marriage of the other two daughters. The plight of the uneducated, unmarried, and ill-treated girls is depicted poignantly by Vaidehi.

The social, familial system has made them believe that marriage is the only means of support and succor in their life.

The father's insensitivity to women's desires and sexuality is displayed once again when he describes the whereabouts of his house. "My house...? It's quite some distance.... You know the house with two half-mad girls; my house is right opposite that" (136). The female narrator of the story is dumbfounded at the casual manner in which he said this, "as though it was common for every town to have mad and half-mad girls" (136). He says with disgust that they beckon men and sometimes, even women, to satisfy their lust. Their amorous move towards a man of his age shocks his orthodox mind and he calls them hysterical. Even the mildest of outward manifestations of the natural sexual urge in a woman is considered sacrilegious and is a social taboo. The narrator hallucinates the image of the drowning girls 'their mouths open but soundless' and 'their eyes dimming behind the window bars' suggesting their helplessness and hopelessness. They are defamed and ignored by the cruel, insensitive and braggart, male world symbolized by the unconcerned father. The daughters of the old man are shut away from the world; they are entrapped in the darkness of four walls, with all avenues of escape to freedom closed. They are caged behind the bars of patriarchy that mistakes and denounces even their natural desire for love and attention as lust. In such an apathetic world the two daughters, and the other two girls who are called half-mad, are mute spectators who watch their youth, individuality and freedom degenerate into oblivion.

With the evolution of the world, when everything of the past has changed in some way or the other, subjugation of women is manifestly the only unchanged old world paradigm. This 'unchanging tradition' is largely supported by the institution of marriage, which John Stuart Mill calls "the destination appointed by society for women" (81).

'Marriage' is regarded as an everlasting bondage in the Indian society; it is assumed to bond man and woman for seven successive lives and not merely one. It is a religious sacrament to be abided by woman by living and dying with her husband in which alone is her salvation. She is expected to pledge her entire 'self' and 'life' to the service of the man called husband. In the bargain, her identity and individuality are erased beyond recognition. Her flight from the natal home to the conjugal home is a shift from familiarity to alienation; from a name to namelessness; from individuality to subjugation. In her new home, she is trimmed and pruned to suit its atmosphere and is compelled to wear the garb of artificiality. All her time and energy are spent in role-playing – wife to the husband, mother to the children, daughter-in-law, nurse to the sick and old, house-keeper, an unpaid cook, and in the modern times, an employee in the outside world too – literally in multi-tasking. She is expected to manage the burden of domesticity uncomplainingly; suppress, forgo all her desires and aspirations; face everything with patience and tolerance. The most important quality in a married woman is her ability to adapt, to compromise. To compromise is to survive; to rebel is to perish. Her entire life is permitted to revolve only around children, family members, other relatives, household work amidst which more often than not her 'self' is totally forgotten or nonexistent.

Vaidehi questions the ideology and assumptions underlying the cultural paradigm and explores the hidden factors that mould the psyche of women. She never presents women characters as stronger than they are in real life. Instead, her stories mirror their realistic conflicts, dilemmas and sensibilities. Her women protagonists are depicted as victims of superstitious beliefs, gross materialism, and biased male institutions. They are forever wistful and melancholic as they see themselves 'living' a life that is powerless, helpless and insecure, a state that is more due to social conditioning rather than the biological flaw. Despite being aware of an individual

self existing within them, they are compelled to indulge in self-denial and resign themselves to fate. Everybody and everything around them grooms them from infancy to suppress their feelings, to conceal their opinions and to withhold their real selves from the society in which they live. They hardly have any choice in the way they live but are required only to fit into the kind of life chosen for them by the dominant forces.

Vaidehi hardly has a grand tale to narrate. On the contrary, she has a penchant for little events, inconsequential people, simple but independent thoughts, modest gestures and humdrum themes through which she throws light on the complex web of women's lives. She attempts to understand the existential realities of her women characters by focusing on the micro levels of their inner life and their everyday experience which is held together by an essential struggle for selfhood and liberty. Vinay Kirpal makes an apt remark in saying that, "...without invoking cosmic occurrences or great movements in history (women writers) bring the philosophical vision within the fold of simple domestic experiences and of everyday happenings" (102). For Vaidehi nothing in women's lives is trivial. She expands a seemingly insignificant scene or event to an extent and height until it becomes hauntingly significant. She reflects on women's thoughts and feelings, their cognizance of male authority, and their strategies of protest and defiance of such authority.

For women in India, family is a world in itself. In reality, family provides each person, male or female a link to the larger society. Women are trapped in a maze of obligations and it is they who link families to a community; to the society at large. It is indeed, women who keep the cycle of life running. But how much of that life and what quality of such life do they actually enjoy or have command over is an intriguing question.

The stories attempt to highlight, through their protagonists, the lives of unmarried girls and the trauma of women caught in the network of social prejudices and struggling to free themselves. They suffer silently, at times they protest too, but sooner or later succumb to the larger forces, suppressing all their aspirations and anger finding no other alternative. The institution of marriage entraps them in the name of ideal womanhood or motherhood. Nevertheless, the ripples of awareness in them, however small they may be, rising against the static, deep-rooted conventions, continue to ebb and flow and never stop till they reach the goal.

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