



Role Of Women As Reflected In Contemporary Telugu Literature

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Abstract

During the early 1920s and 1930s, Telugu women's literature began to transcend its traditional confines within the religious sphere. The conventional literary portrayal of women's roles and status in society faced significant scrutiny during the post-independence period, especially in the 1960s. Various complex and interconnected factors contributed to these evolving perceptions of women's roles in society. Gender bias played a central role in these re-articulations of social and imaginative life, with Telugu women writers making significant contributions. Women's works, published from the 1940s through the 1990s, document the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of our nation, state, and region, as part of their efforts to reshape these entities on multiple levels.

Keywords: literature, traditional confines, religious sphere, conventional literary

Introduction:

The evolution of Telugu women's literary work from these three viewpoints and brings to light the growth and progress of Telugu Women as writers. The status of women in the former State of Andhra Pradesh (currently divided into the State of Telangana and State of Andhra Pradesh) has progressed through many ups and downs. Beginning as far back as the 12th Century to date, literary arts by women have contributed much to the growth of Telugu literature as a whole and have brought forth many women's issues into the spotlight. Be it poetry, prose or fiction, these women writers have created and embraced a new dimension, and continue expressing their strengths, weaknesses, compassion, forbearance, and a wide range of human emotions that define womanhood through their writings. Women's literature during the past decade that has been categorized as 'feministic writings' reflecting the struggle of women for equality including private aspects of life that were considered unqualified for public discourse historically.

Status of women reflected in the ancient writings of Telugu Women

The struggle of women writers to claim their own space and make their voices heard has a long and complex history. The status of women varied across different historical periods and regions, but generally, they faced suppression and male domination within a patriarchal system. In the past, women's lives were deeply intertwined with rituals, puranas, and itihisas rooted in religion. During the early Vedic period, women enjoyed a respectable position in society. Renowned Vedic scholars like Gargi and Maithreyee, as well as popular poets such as Vak, Lopamudra, Ghosha, and Apala, had their verses included in the Vedas

and puranas. This era and its values represent the zenith of women's honor in early Brahmanical society.

However, in the later Vedic period, the status of women began to deteriorate. Subjugation, polygamy, child marriage, and restrictive widowhood practices emerged, stifling women's creativity. The Manu Smriti imposed numerous restrictions on women's activities, declaring that a woman's highest duty was to obey her husband. Consequently, women were relegated to a submissive, weak, dependent, and often illiterate segment of society.

When Buddhism emerged, the virtues of early Brahmanical society that honored women were somewhat revived. However, the period of Muslim invasions in India marked the lowest point for women's social freedom, leading to the rise of oppressive customs such as child marriage, sati, and purdah. Women's conditions became dire. Despite this, oral traditions persisted, allowing women to express their challenges and perceptions of the world.

The emergence of the Bhakti Movement in Southern India had a profound impact on Telugu women's literature, particularly through the contributions of women poets from the 12th to the 18th centuries. This period saw the rise of Bhakti Kavithvam, devotional poetry written by Telugu women, which often served as a medium to address and critique social, familial, and economic issues under the guise of devotion. An analysis of this era will highlight the various prominent women writers and their efforts to bring attention to these issues through their devotional works. For example:

1. Kuppamma, was the first female poet to express dissatisfaction regarding gender-bias in the society. Her name was traced out of later literary efforts either due to ignorance or as a result of a push-back.
2. Muddupalani was the first female poet to address gender-specific and caste- oriented issues in Telugu literature (1730-1790: Radhika Swanthanam). Reprinting this book in the 19th century involved major controversy in the unified State of Andhra Pradesh.
3. Poets like Vemuri Saradamba addressed problems like illiteracy faced by the common house wives in their daily chores and the methods they had adopted to overcome these challenges (1898: Madhava Sathakam). According to her works, women of those days used small lines and signs on the wall to count the days of milk supplies, etc. as expressed here: ' *golladhi challa vadukida godala geethala geechi....* '
4. The different forms of literature contributed by women during the reign of Tanjavur Nayaka Kings with special focus on Rangajamma the first woman to write 'Yakshaganam', a popular folk theatre form.

The contributions of the 'Veshya' (prostitution) system to the Telugu literature. It is critical we address this much disavowed aspect of our cultural evolution as these systems sometimes were a significant source of taxes (income) to the Kings' treasury and housed women adept at an artful pursuit of politics and survival.

Telugu Women Writers: Enlightened Middle-Class Female Identity in the Colonial Reform Era

When the British arrived in India, the condition of women further deteriorated across the country. In response, individuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Maharshi Karve, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, and Vishnu Shastri Pandit initiated social reform and revivalist movements. These movements aimed at the emancipation of Indian women and consisted of two distinct groups: the Reformers and the Revivalists.

The Reformers opposed restrictive and coercive social customs and institutions, arguing that they

contradicted the democratic principles of liberty and freedom. The Revivalists, on the other hand, advocated for the democratization of social relations and the removal of harmful practices by reviving the values of Vedic society, which they believed to be inherently democratic. This new awareness and passion against women's oppression are strongly reflected in the writings of Indian women during this period. (2015: Puja Mondal, Social Reform Movement in India and the Role of Women)

In the last quarter of the 19th century, both progressive and orthodox reformers supported female education in the then State of Andhra Pradesh. Kandukuri Veeresalingam Panthulu (1848-1919), a prominent Telugu social reformer, championed women's education, widow remarriages, and the eradication of prostitution and superstitions against women. In 1883, Veeresalingam launched the first exclusive women's magazine in Telugu, 'Sati Hitha Bodhini'. This period marked a breakthrough for Telugu women writers, who began to balance their thoughts and reflect the existing social ambivalence in their works.

Reformist Kandukuri Veeresalingam Panthulu made significant contributions to the advancement of Telugu women writers, advocating for women's education and challenging superstitious beliefs and practices that subjugated women, such as sati, reclusive widowhood, and prostitution. This new awareness was vividly expressed in women's writings during this era.

Between 1883 and 1947, several Telugu magazines were launched and published exclusively for women, providing a platform for female voices and perspectives. This project aims to review the works of women who published in these magazines, reflecting on society and its issues as presented through their lens. By doing so, it will shed light on the unsung poets and prose writers who shaped the lives of many women but have not found a prominent place in the literary history of Telugu women. Additionally, this focus will highlight the evolution of female journalism. Some of the notable magazines are:

- a. Sati Hita Bodhini – 1883
- b. Hindu Sundari – 1902
- c. Savithri – 1904
- d. Anasuya – 1914

Impact of women like:

- e. Andhra Lakshmi – 1921
- f. Bharatha Mahila – 1925
- g. Gruha Lakshmi – 1927
- h. Andhra Mahila – 1942

Bhandaru Acchamamba (1874-1904), the first woman to establish an organization for women, authored 'Abala Saccharitra Ratnamala,' an exceptional collection of biographies of notable women. Kanuparthi Varalakshamma, in her work 'Sarada Lekhalu,' captured the political and socio-economic changes and their impact on women. This book addresses various legal acts and amendments, including the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829, and the granting of voting rights to women in 1932, among others.

The Literary Contributions of Telugu Women During the National Independence Struggle

During the struggle for Indian Independence, both Gandhian and Left-wing politics played a crucial role in mobilizing women and offering them opportunities to step into the public sphere. Women's equality was a central goal of Gandhian politics, with Gandhi's emphasis on 'Stree Shakti' (the power of women) encouraging women to participate actively in the freedom movement. Ironically, the idea of women's involvement in the nationalist movement gained traction because prevailing beliefs about women being inherently self-sacrificing aligned well with the principles of non-violent protest.

Literature played a vital role in India's freedom struggle, with an increasing number of Telugu women joining the movement and using literature for patriotic purposes. As the freedom movement gained momentum and the demand for independence intensified, literature bolstered the growing idealism of the people. Inspired by both the freedom struggle and reform movements, Telugu women writers contributed to contemporary magazines, newspapers, books, and other publications, motivating the public to resist British rule. The following Telugu women writers to the freedom struggle and their impact:

Tallapragada Viswasundaramma – She is a well-known Telugu poetess and wrote a number of poems to inspire the freedom fighters. She was arrested and sent to jail for participating in the nationalist movement. Her poems brought to light the problems faced by female freedom fighters who were arrested and sent to the jail ('Jailu Gadiyaramu').

Desiraju Bharathi Devi - She was a freedom fighter and a writer. She participated in the Swadeshi movement and used simple Telugu poems to propagate the principles of Mahatma Gandhi to the Telugu women and people.

Many other women writers like Veluvolu Vasantha Devi, P. Seetharamamma, Devulapalli Satyavathamma, Oleti Nitya Kalyanamma, J.Kameswari, Jnanamba, Inaganti Ratnamma, Paruchuri Bhuvaneswari, Annapurnadevi, etc., who published patriotic literature in the contemporary magazines and papers regularly.

On August 15, 1947, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, with emotional and poetic fervor, declared, "We end today a period of ill fortune, and India discovers herself." Post-colonial writers faced the challenge of uncovering the Indian soul that had been suppressed under colonial rule. With the formation of linguistic states, regional languages rapidly developed and gained official language status in many states.

Alongside other Indian women writers and contemporary male authors, Telugu women writers expressed anti-colonial sentiments with a distinctive native voice. This era saw the emergence of new forms and genres in Telugu literature. Telugu women writers adeptly captured the transition from feudal to capitalist social relations across various spheres. While they adhered to traditional methods of expression, they also broke new ground, shaping future literary traditions. They moved away from traditional themes and language while still valuing traditional principles in real life, marking a period of subtle yet significant revolution.

In Indian, and specifically Telugu, culture, where oral tradition has long served as a primary means of teaching and sharing knowledge, women writers embraced and excelled in the art of narration. The familial, social, and cultural status of women writers, along with the prevailing social conditions, significantly contributed to their success during this period.

Throughout this time, hundreds of women writers published stories, poems, novels, songs, and dramas that explored various aspects of women's lives and contemporary social conditions. However, the broader history of Telugu literature has largely overlooked this phase and the contributions of these women, except for a few notable figures.

This paper aims to highlight the familial, cultural, social, and professional issues addressed by these overlooked women writers, estimated to number in the hundreds, between 1950 and 1980.

Suffering of women reflected in the women writing during the period of Telangana Peasant Movement (1940-1950) and to Recent Separate Telangana movement (2001-2014)

Women played a crucial role in the Telangana Peasant Movement, seizing the opportunity to step beyond their traditional roles, which were largely confined to domestic duties and agriculture. They actively engaged in struggles for land rights, agricultural labor, wage increases, and the seizure of landlord's grain. They also fought against the eviction of Koya, Chenchu, and Lambadi tribes from their villages during the intense Telangana armed struggle.

In their battle against the Rajakars and military forces, they endured severe hardships, including brutal torture, rape, and exploitation by the Rajakars, Nizam's forces, and Nehru's police and military. Their stories of courageous and steadfast resistance in defense of their dignity have been instrumental in inspiring broader societal demands for social equality and justice.

Many oral autobiographical stories have been narrated by illiterate women who fought for their land rights, such as Chakali Ailamma from Palakurthi village, Kumari, and Dudala Salamma. These stories include various songs depicting the torture suffered by women during the Telangana Peasant Movement, such as 'Chilakamma Pata.'

Regionalism intensified the struggle between dominant and disadvantaged groups, leading to the emergence of separatist movements like 'Telangana'. This struggle was also reflected in Telugu literature, with depictions of these movements appearing across all literary genres, particularly during the periods 1940-50 and 2001-14.

The Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), an Indian regional political party based in Telangana, was founded on April 27, 2001, with the primary goal of creating a separate Telangana State with Hyderabad as its capital. The TRS has played a crucial role in driving a sustained agitation for Telangana's statehood. Women in the Telangana region of the united Andhra Pradesh, particularly educated urban middle-class women, were actively involved in the movement. Vimalakka, a prominent leader, remarked, "Women who participated in the movement are now more courageous and prepared to fight for their rights."

Feministic writings – struggle for equality-covering different aspects of women's life

'In childhood a woman should be under her father's control. In youth under her husband's and when her husband is dead, under her sons', she should not have independence (*'na stree swathanthryamarhasi'*). - *Manu Smriti*

The term feminism has its origin in the Latin word 'femina', meaning woman. Women have, for the most part of recent history, been projected as secondary and inferior human beings. Feminism is perhaps the most powerful movement that swept the literary world in the recent decades.

Telugu feminist writers address key issues such as gender discrimination, patriarchal dominance, domestic and sexual violence, and the exploitation of women. They also critically examine the roles of State and Central governments, which continue to operate with a patriarchal mindset. Over the past three decades, Telugu women have actively participated in various movements, including those against rising prices, dowry, and the Telangana Peasant Movement, as well as high-profile rape cases like those of Ramijabi, Shakilabi, and the Dader Express incident. Other significant events include the contemporary Telangana farmers' movement, the anti-arrack movement, and protests against state violence involving figures like

Rajavva and Sathemma. More recently, the anti-liquor movement has also highlighted women's struggles in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

In response to these atrocities, the feminist movement in Telugu literature articulated the suffering and unrest caused by gender discrimination, fueling resistance across all social sectors. The anthology *Neelimeghalu* (1993), which features feminist poetry, marked the emergence of feminist ideology in Telugu literature. This ideology later influenced short stories, novels, and other literary genres.

To capture the unique traditions, challenges, and perspectives of women, many writings from this period and earlier have diverged from traditional male-dominated literary approaches. This shift has fostered a distinctive female tradition of writing, one that resists interpretation that might obscure or ignore women's perspectives.

In literary history, as in all forms of history, the story of Dalit women writers has often been overshadowed by the dark legacy of casteism. Dalits, including Dalit women, have historically faced lower literacy levels compared to many other oppressed or underprivileged groups within the Indian diaspora. The realities of Dalit life—their struggles, their suffering, and their resilience—are expressed through their stories, songs, and poetry.

Despite this, there have been notable instances of literary brilliance among Dalit women from as early as the 13th century with figures like Molla, extending to the present day. The literary works produced by Dalit women, grounded in their lived experiences, are often more poignant and impactful compared to those of Dalit men or upper-caste women. Dalit women face dual oppression: one from the caste system and another from gender and class exploitation.

Molla: Who wrote 'Ramayana' in Telugu in the 13th century could be called the first Dalit woman poet. She belonged to the potter caste (kummari).

Kolakaluri Swarooparani: In the modern age, a woman poet who has written verse in the ancient tradition is Kolakaluri Swarooparani. She has been conferred the title of 'Kavayithri Tilaka'. Some of her important writings are 'Gangavatharanam', 'Sivathandavam', 'Chandra grahanam' and 'Prabodham'.

To focus on the issues of Dalit women reflected in the contemporary Dalit feminist poetry, works of women like Challapalli Swarooparani, Madduri Vijayasri, Darisi Sasi Nirmala, G.Vijaya Lakshmi, Rani, N.Vijaya Bharathi, Gogu Syamala and M.Gouri etc. will be analysed.

Conclusion

The rationale for exploring the indigenous roots of Telugu women's literature lies in understanding its specific development within the colonial context. Under colonial rule, Telugu women writers encountered an intellectual milieu infused with ideas of liberalism, freedom, educational rights, and social awareness. Women's involvement in the freedom struggle fostered a critical awareness of their roles and rights in independent India. Literary feminism focused on the politics of women's authorship and the representation of women's conditions in literature. In capturing the unique traditions, challenges, and perspectives of women, many writings from this period, and historically, deviated from traditional male-dominated literary approaches. This shift has led to the development of a distinct female tradition of writing, which resists being overlooked or distorted by male perspectives. It challenges prejudice in literature and underscores how Telugu women's literary contributions offer a valuable lens into their knowledge, struggles, expertise, and creativity from the very beginning.

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