



DESIRE AND DEFIANCE: ANALYSING SUBBAMMA'S SEXUALITY AND AUTONOMY IN KUVEMPU'S *KANOORU HEGGADITHI*

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Abstract: This research paper explores the themes of sexual desire, bodily autonomy, and socio-political defiance through the character of Subbamma in Kuvempu's landmark Kannada novel, *Kanooru Subbamma Heggadithi* (1936), translated into English as *The House of Kanooru*. Situated within a rigidly patriarchal and feudal framework, the study examines how Subbamma—married to Chandrayya Gowda, a tyrannical village headman significantly older than her—embodies the volatile tension between institutional marital coercion and the untamed desires of youth. Grounded in a textual analysis of her initial romantic yearning for the younger Hoovayya, her subsequent disillusionment with marriage, and her ultimate assertive rebellion, this paper argues that Subbamma's desire functions as more than an internal psychological state. Instead, it operates as a subversive socio-political force that directly challenges the hegemony of the Kanooru household. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Kuvempu constructs female desire not as a passive, suppressed emotion, but as a site of profound bodily struggle, agency, and anti-patriarchal resistance.

Key Words - Kuvempu, Kanooru, Subbamma, Desire, Patriarchal Oppression, Feudalism, Resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Kuvempu's monumental 1936 Kannada novel, *Kanooru Subbamma Heggadithi* (translated into English as *The House of Kanooru*), is a sprawling epic of Malnad agrarian society during the twilight of the feudal era. Amidst an intricate web of caste hierarchies, familial politics, and shifting socio-economic structures, the novel maps the interiority of its female characters with remarkable psychological depth. At the epicentre of this narrative tension stands Subbamma, the young, vibrant mistress of the Kanooru household.

The foundation of the Kanooru household rests upon an unyielding patriarchal and feudal order governed by Chandrayya Gowda. In this ecosystem, women are commodified as markers of lineage, property, and domestic labour. Subbamma's marriage to Chandrayya Gowda represents a classic feudal transaction wherein youth, vitality, and desire are forcibly subordinated to age, authority, and institutional power. Trapped within an architectural and social panopticon—where the Kanooru house functions as an institution that surveils, disciplines, and regulates female bodies—Subbamma experiences the full weight of marital coercion. Yet, rather than resigning herself to the role of a passive, domesticated subaltern, she navigates her confinement through an assertion of sexual desire and bodily autonomy.

In early 20th-century Indian literature, particularly within representations of the male-dominated Malnad region, female characters were typically expected to be invisible, silent, and entirely subservient. Women were frequently romanticized, maternalized, or desexualized to fit the ideal archetype of the *pativrata*—the pure, self-sacrificing, and devoted wife modelled after mythic figures. Kuvempu's novel shatters this passive stereotype, standing as a masterpiece of Indian realism.

II. THE TRAP OF FEUDAL MARRIAGE AND THE AWAKENING OF DESIRE

Before the crushing weight of her reality fully takes hold, Subbamma's interiority is animated by a romantic and sensual yearning directed toward Hoovayya, the educated, progressive younger scion of the family. Before her marriage is arranged, Subbamma catches a glimpse of the young, attractive Hoovayya at a wedding. This brief visual encounter awakens a potent, instinctual sexual desire within her; she harbours a secret wish to be bound to him, mapping her future happiness onto the vitality of a youthful partner.

When a marriage proposal came from the wealthy Kanooru household, she happily assumed it was for Hoovayya. The abrupt realization that she was actually being married off to the middle-aged, twice-widowed, and authoritarian patriarch Chandrayya Gowda permanently shattered her youthful romantic aspirations. Unlike the transactional, sterile nature of her marriage to Gowda, her attraction to Hoovayya represented a natural alignment of youth, intellect, and emotional resonance.

Kuvempu does not depict Subbamma's desire as a moral failing; rather, it is presented as a vital awakening of female subjectivity. In a society that seeks to completely erase female sexual autonomy, Subbamma's yearning is a radical reclamation of her internal emotional landscape. She dares to imagine a world where her body is not public property governed by feudal decree, but a vessel for genuine human connection.

III. PRIMARY OBJECTIVES:

- To evaluate female desire, bodily autonomy, and social rebellion through the character of Subbamma in Kuvempu's *Kanooru Heggadithi*.
- To examine how Subbamma challenges the rigid patriarchal and feudal structures of pre-independence Malnad society.
- To analyse how female characters navigate traditional familial hierarchies and gender roles within the novel.

IV. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY:

This study limits its scope to exploring Subbamma's sexuality, bodily autonomy, and domestic agency within the feudal household of Kanooru. Employing a qualitative, textual analysis of selected passages from Kuvempu's novel, the research focuses specifically on the domestic, bodily, and spatial politics surrounding Subbamma, demonstrating that female agency in feudal contexts is deeply rooted in embodied experience.

V. DISILLUSIONMENT AND THE REALIZATION OF BODILY ALIENATION

As the narrative progresses, Subbamma's romantic idealism crashes against the unyielding wall of feudal reality. The realization that her desires cannot be actualized within the rigid moral and social architecture of Malnad leads to a profound psychological crisis. Subbamma experiences intense bodily alienation—the jarring disconnect between her pulsating, youthful physical self and the deadening domestic role assigned to her by the *Heggadithi* status.

Chandrayya Gowda systematically reduces young women to mere property and tokens of social prestige. His dominance manifests in brutal physical and psychological abuse, driven by deep-seated paranoia and misogyny. As noted in the text:

"Eh, why is the curry burnt? Why?" He looked up at his wife and shouted threateningly. The question was merely an excuse for what followed. Subbamma hadn't even started to reply when Chandrayya Gowda got up, picked up in his unwashed hand the thick stick on the shelf to drive away cats and started to thrash her mercilessly... (*The House of Kanooru*, 88)

Rather than shrinking in fear or internalizing her abuse as immutable "karma," Subbamma openly resists. She uses subtle acts of sabotage—such as deliberately burning meals—to signal her defiance and assert her presence. However, the constant suspicion and violence take a severe toll:

He thought his wife would kill him and felt poison was mixed in the food... "What have you put into the *palya*? Come on. Out with it!" he shouted and shook her pulling her by her plait... "You are lying, are not

you, slut? Come on, confess! Haven't you put some poison into it because your lover suggested it?" (*The House of Kanooru*, 349)

This growing despair is not a sign of weakness; it is an acute consciousness of her oppression, serving as the psychological crucible out of which her eventual defiance is forged.

VI. POST-WIDOWHOOD AGENCY AND THE TRAGEDY OF DEFIANCE

Following Chandrayya Gowda's death, feudal customs demand that Subbamma transition into a state of asexual, ascetic widowhood—invisible, self-effacing, and stripped of desire. Instead, Subbamma embraces her living body. In a society that treats a widow's desire as a social transgression, her refusal to disavow her sexuality becomes her ultimate act of rebellion.

Stepping into the power vacuum, Subbamma wields the authority she gains as the *Heggadithi*. She navigates the persistent advances of the overseer, Rangappa Shetty:

Ever since the day the overseer had held Subbamma's hand and embraced her while crossing the ditch, new thoughts, feelings and desires had sprouted in both of them... Even when he held her close after crossing the ditch, Subbamma had not shouted... her behaviour on that occasion had given the overseer, an expert in seduction, a new hope... (*The House of Kanooru*, 524)

Subbamma's evolution, however, is not a simple tale of liberation; it is a complex psychological tragedy. Trapped within a patriarchal system, the only model of authority she has witnessed is despotic. Her rule over servants mirrors the authoritarian methods of her late husband, illustrating Kuvempu's brilliant psychological insight: when oppressive systems are seized rather than dismantled, the oppressed risk adopting the machinery of their former oppressors.

Ultimately, Subbamma's involvement with Rangappa Shetty leads to a devastating climax. Becoming pregnant out of wedlock and unable to face social ostracism in a caste-bound society, she attempts to terminate the pregnancy using native medicine, resulting in her tragic death—a personal downfall that parallels the broader collapse of the Kanooru estate.

VII. CONCLUSION

A close reading of *Kanooru Heggadithi* demonstrates Kuvempu's progressive understanding of female subjectivity and body politics. Subbamma's character constructs a powerful critique of the interlocking systems of patriarchy and feudalism. Her journey from an innocent girl longing for Hoovayya to the defiant, complex *Heggadithi* proves that female desire is an active, destabilizing force capable of challenging entrenched institutional authority.

When a feudal order denies a woman autonomy and reduces her body to a commodity for estate management, that suppressed energy transforms into a revolutionary catalyst. Ultimately, the female body becomes the central battleground where the rigid, casteist, and patriarchal structures of the Malnad region meet their inevitable decay and collapse.

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