

# Telugu Women Writers, 1950-1975 Andhra Pradesh, India

A Unique Phenomenon in the History of Telugu Fiction  
(A Critical Study)



*Nidadavolu Malathi*

2013

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## Foreword by Nidadavolu Malathi

In the history of Telugu fiction, one quarter of a century following the achievement of our independence in 1947, from 1950 to 1975, stands out as unique for women's fiction writing. Contrary to the popular belief that women's writing suffered for want of "a room of her own" and/or lack of economic resources, Telugu female writers wrote and published their fiction with extraordinary success. Sitting quietly in their kitchens or on the back porch, they wrote and rose to a level where they could dictate their terms to magazine editors and publishers, demand contracts without submitting complete manuscripts, and were paid higher than their male counterparts. Using female pseudonyms by male writers became common during this period. To the best of my knowledge, this is unique and happened only in Andhra Pradesh.

In the past several centuries, women writers were quiet and anchored in religion. Present day writers are highly vocal and anchored in their ideologies. Historically positioned between these two groups, approximately one hundred women created distinctive fiction for a period of two and a half decades. This book is an attempt, however small, to examine their contributions contextually, and demonstrate that they, quiescent on the surface, had raised potent questions and expressed unconventional views powerfully in their fiction. I started out with a couple of premises: first, in our culture, which evolved over a period of several centuries, the demographics have played a vital role in formulating the familial and societal values. Secondly, women in the past had created their own world imbued with rituals, stories and songs, anchored in religion. Their literature was conformational. Starting in the eighties, women writers have labeled themselves as feminists, created a world of their own with separate magazines, organizations, literatures and websites, and are anchored in their ideologies. Their fiction and poetry are confrontational.

Positioned between these two groups, the women writers of the fifties and sixties created fiction, taking a significant part of the past tradition in expressing their views yet deviated from the beaten path and laid the ground for later writers. It was a period of silent revolution. By that, I mean, they had departed from the traditional past in their choice of themes and language, while continued to cherish the traditional values in real life. Owing to the democratic principles put in place in 1947, the female writers were able to set a new trend and evolve a new culture, and enlist the support of men in the process.

This book addresses one more need. During the nineties, two major works, *Women Writing in India* (1993) and *Knit India through Literature* by Sivasankari (1998), have been published on women's writing in India. Both the volumes set Telugu women's writing in the larger context of Indian literatures. This book, on the other hand, offers exclusively an in-depth analysis of Telugu women's writings. This is a product of my personal knowledge and experience, and my standing as a writer from the period under discussion.

Some of my friends in the United States asked me why I had chosen this particular period for my study. The one simple answer is, as a writer, I belonged to that generation, and therefore, am interested in examining how they/we had fared in the history of Telugu fiction. However, more importantly, lack of an all-encompassing critical work on this segment of Telugu literature, namely, the fiction by women writers during the period, 1950-1975, and, thirdly, the fear that it might disappear completely in course of time if somebody had not brought it to the fore. Yet another reason is, while the academic studies are focused

on the literature of the past, and the current literature is featured in magazines and the media extensively, a well-balanced critical analysis of the fiction by women writers of the immediate past is sadly missing.

I must admit that this book raises more questions than provide answers. Due to severe constraints of resources, financial as well as academic, this book is nowhere near being complete. Nevertheless, it provides valuable information and lays the ground for further research. I have put forth a few of my arguments and raised a few questions, with the pious hope that our Telugu scholars will continue to explore and examine this area of study further.

I attempted to trace the familial, social, and economic conditions that contributed to the success of women writers during this period; also, various stages in the development of women's fiction—from encouragement and praise at home and in the society to reward, and later to ridicule and even to damaging criticism in the final stage.

This is also a personal journey for me. For that reason, I chose the style of narrative nonfiction in this book. The intended audience for this book is non-native speakers and non-Telugu readers. In that, I may have given more details than necessary in explaining the cultural nuance at times.

Organization: I started out with a brief history of women's writing identifying the areas where their values came from, and discussed their familial and social conditions. In chapter 3, I gave the synopses for a few short stories and novels in order to familiarize the readers with our fiction. My assumption is that the readers are not knowledgeable in Telugu language, and thus not in a position to read the original texts. The synopses are intended to facilitate further discussion in the next chapter. In chapter 5, I gave a brief note on culture and humor and my conclusions in chapter 6.

Originally, I planned to include a few stories in translation, in support of my views on the fiction under discussion. However, while finalizing this manuscript for self-publishing, I realized that it would serve my purpose better if I made the stories in translation available separately. I urge readers to visit my website, [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net), for stories discussed in this book and several other stories.

Data gathering: I started on this project nearly twenty-five years ago. Thanks to a small travel grant from American Institute of Indian Studies, I was able to go to India and interview several writers and magazine editors. In addition to reading the books I had access to, I wrote to the writers, invited readers to write their opinions on the women writers of the period under discussion, and also traveled to India to interview writers, magazine editors, and publishers. Although I had started in the early eighties, I had to put away for several years in between for personal reasons. Again, in the summer of 2000, I had the opportunity to revive the project. Thus, part of the data may be dated. However, I have revised this version, based on the discussions I had with several writers, male and female, in the past six years.

For the Telugu and Sanskrit words in this book, I wrote the words per pronunciation, following our practice in Andhra Pradesh. Being unfamiliar with the use of diacritical marks, and uncomfortable with the transliteration used by some writers, I decided to avoid both the practices.

One more note regarding the form of address. In referring to the authors, I used the first names per custom in our country. For us, the established practice is to address a person by his or her first name, with the suffix, *garu*, in the case of adults both male and female.

It is my sincere hope that my venture of recording a piece of history that might otherwise be lost for future generations will encourage scholars to undertake further research.

Kalpana Rentala, a well-known feminist writer from current generation, has taken the time to write foreword to my book, as soon as I asked. Thanks, Kalpana, for the informative foreword. I wish you all the best in your writing activities.

My daughter, Sarayu Rao, is a big part of my life and activities. She has watched me through my triumphs and travails of this undertaking. Therefore, I asked her what she thought of it. Her observations in her own words are fascinating. Thanks, Sarayu! I wish you all the best in your acting career.

I am thankful to the writers, editors, and readers who had shared their views during the course of data collection.

Malathi Nidadavolu  
Madison, Wisconsin  
July 2008

## In Her Own Words by Sarayu Rao

Growing up, my mother always told me stories. Both she and my father kept storytelling a tradition in our household. I would come home from school, silent and pouting because of some petty teenage problem and my mother would see my sullen face and immediately know what was wrong. She was always clairvoyant, picking up on everything with or without words. She would look at me and ask what was wrong, hoping I would let her in. I always responded with a shrug and the word, "nothing" as I sulked into my room and slammed the door. Somehow, despite my hardened efforts to keep her out of my life, she with her innate subtlety found a way to make me feel better without me even knowing it. She always had a story. "Do you know the story of how Lord Ganesha came to existence?" She would say. I would shake my head no, and the storytelling would begin. No matter how angry I was, how large the world seemed or how small I felt, by the end of the story I was completely drawn in, as the rest of the world melted away. Her storytelling skills were not a surprise as she was a published short story writer in India as well.

My mother is of the strongest women I know. She is also the most stubborn and headstrong and she has done a brilliant job of raising a daughter with similar qualities. I remember when I was nine and she and I were walking through a mall in Madison, Wisconsin. We saw the people from a karate school putting on a demonstration. She took the information and immediately signed me up. She knew if I was going to survive in this world as a woman, I'd better know how to defend myself. She was right. Knowing Tae Kwon Do instilled a confidence in me that has been irreplaceable.

My Mother is my idol. I will consider myself lucky if I handle my life with the grace, dignity and pride with which my mother has shown during her years. She has unbelievable stamina and never stops trying something new, as she is truly a fighter. I've yet to see a person approach the tests of the universe with such fervor and determination as she does, never once stopping to become the victim in the story. Her brilliance and sparkle move everyone who knows her to get closer to her and still she maintains humility and responsibility for herself and her actions. She believes in the human voice and the power it has to change the world, she believes in helping each other and she believes in fighting for what is right and stopping cruelty to people, animals and other people. If I am making her sound like a super hero, it is because in my eyes she is. That being said, you can trust me, my biased opinion would be shared by you if you knew her.

When my mother told me she began this work, I was thrilled. She has always instilled in me that as a woman in this world it is important for me to recognize my power. Her belief does not come from a place of anger toward men, but rather a sincere belief that women have an inherent strength that we must be willing to possess and share. She believes not in a hierarchy where women are above men, but in equality, not "feminism," as she used to say, but "humanism." She taught me to have respect for other's opinions and voices but never to lose value in my own.

This book is a beautifully written record of how so many Telugu women in India found ways to share their voices. It helps us to understand the variety of approaches women in India had to use in order to write the stories we needed to hear. It explains how the world surrounding them in their time affected their abilities and what they chose to write about. These women were pioneers in their own right, as is my mother. It does not surprise me

that she would choose to write about these passionate, bright women who found clear, intelligent ways to share their voices during a time when support for them was just beneath surface level. Her fire and thirst for writing and women is unending and contagious, as I am certain you will find in these chapters.

Sarayu Rao  
Actress  
N. Hollywood, California  
October 2004



## Ending the boilerplate Literary History by Kalpana Rentala

We have one thousand years of literary history. Up until now, there has been an effort to portray women's literature only as a part of the mainstream history. Women writers were mentioned—one Molla or one Timmakka—sporadically. Our history is a male-dominated record that is accustomed to record women's participation only as a measly strand.

Ever since westernization started influencing our culture, women's awareness started changing. That is reflected in the fields of literature, science, and sociology. The massive changes, which have been taking place in the men's perceptions are noticed but there has never been a systematic attempt to note the changes that have been taking place in the perceptions of women—their mode of development, their participation in the academy, and their mode of thinking.

Today, a concrete attempt to question this boilerplate documentation, and rewrite a different kind history has begun. This is not limited to a handful of persons or books. They are examining the women's consciousness from several angles and in various fields. Until now, women's contribution has been recognized only partially, and limiting to a few writers or a specific period. A few responsible writers however departed from this tradition in an attempt to study women's writings in a larger context. Nidadavolu Malathi is one of them.

In this book, Malathi examines the history of Telugu fiction and women's fiction from a completely different angle and from the existing records.

In general, whenever women's fiction is mentioned, the writers presented are invariably either a few novelists or feminists as they came to be known in the 1980s. However, there never has been a better, comprehensive discussion on the subject. The number of female short story writers was much higher during the time the freedom movement and the women's education movement peaked, but it was not so after the declaration of independence.

This is particularly obvious when we consider the availability of printing presses, women's awareness of identity, and several other amenities available for women to write. The number, however, is much less comparatively speaking. A famous critic, Racapalem Chandrasekhara Reddy raised the question, "Should we attribute this decline in the number of female writers writing short fiction to their preference to write novels instead?" (*Telugu kathakulu– kathana reetulu*, part 3, p. 111).

Contradicting that stance, Malathi has shown, quoting several examples, that women writers have not written only novels but also several excellent stories. She also has discussed at length their themes and technique. Malathi's detailed analysis of their themes and technique in this book can be considered a milestone in the literary history of Telugu women.

Malathi has not used the term "feminism" yet has pointed out clearly that women's awareness of identity did not start with the feminists in the eighties. It was evident even in the fiction of nineteen fifties. Her detailed analysis of stories like *eduru chuusina muhurtam* by P. Saraladevi, depicting women's awareness of identity enhances our respect for writers of the past.

The history of Telugu fiction, which often quotes *diddubaatu* by Gurajada Appa Rao as the first short story in Telugu attached very little importance to women's writing. The histories speak extensively of Gurajada, Malladi, and Sripada, but very little about Bhandaru

Acchamamba, Kanuparti Varalakshamma, Kommuri Padmavatidevi, Illindala Saraswatidevi, P. Sridevi. Adimadhyam Ramanamma, Sivaraju Subbalakshmi and several others. Nobody has discussed the works by these women writers in a meaningful way.

As far as the discussion on the fifties writings is concerned, reference to women's writings appears *naamke vaaste* [nominal]. If we see the books and articles written so far on Telugu short story, we find only one or two unqualified sentences limited to three or four women writers and an all inclusive phrase "and others". We have no evidence of anybody paying serious attention to these women's stories, their themes, and techniques; much less analyzing them in detail. On rare occasions, we might find a complete article on women writers. But nowhere have we seen a complete analysis of women writers' contribution as a part of mainstream literary history. I have no doubt that Gurajada, Malladi and Sripada are great writers. But, my question is, don't we have to study the women's fiction in detail and in the same light in order to assess their works, and see how they stack up?

When we examine the story, *diddubaatu* by Gurajada in juxtaposition with the stories, *strividya* and *khanna*, written by Bhandaru Acchamamba, we will understand that the latter two stories are in no way inferior to Gurajada's story. Acchamamba, who was already educated by 1900, had written women's biographies and several stories, yet her writings were ignored. No literary historian of Telugu fiction bothered to make a note of Acchamamba's stories.

One of her stories, *khana*, for instance, narrates the social conditions of her time and her ill-fated life. Khana was wife of Mihira, an astrologer in king Vikramaditya's court. The story vouches for the women's awareness of their conditions as early as the 1900s.

Yet another example is the story *kuteera Lakshmi* by Kanuparti Varalakshamma. The story depicts the aftermath of the Great War, the manner in which the large-scale industries such as the Manchester Company caused the ruination of the local and handloom industries, and the significance of our nationalist movement. Once again, very few literary historians made a note of this story.

It sounds harsh but the reality is through out the history from the earliest to date, the literary historians stated women's writings as "by women and for women only" but made no serious attempt to give it its due place in history and examine it as an intrinsic part of the mainstream literature.

Women have always been perceived as a part of our movements—women's, social and education—but there is no other attempt to place them contextually. History made a special note of women's education only for the purpose of women's role at home, for their contribution to the family's wellbeing, but not for assimilating them into the mainstream. The social reformers intended women's education only to make her a better housewife. There is no evidence to show that they wanted women to become better persons. Malathi pointed out this biased view of the reformers in her book.

The period immediately following the achievement of independence, namely 1950-1975, was a very important period. That was the time when major changes were taking place in all the fields—political, sociological, and literary. And most of the literary historians dismissed that significant period, labeling it the age of novels or romance fiction.

During that period, several significant novels were written. Several novels illustrated sensitive issues relating to man-woman relationships, and important familial issues. Yet, even a senior critic like Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma could not make a valid comment on this fiction. In his article, "*telugu katha, samaajika spruha*" [Telugu story and social consciousness], he wrote, "Many women writers were able to depict a woman's life to the extent it was correlated to a man's life. However, one can see from their writings that women knew absolutely nothing about the man's world. There is no brainpower. They are

hopelessly poor in their command of language. They do not read at all. They are lifeless cutouts submerged in self-aggrandizement, slandering others, and ego trips. This confounding state, which the women had created, pulled down the level of Telugu readers, and turned the clock back to fifty-years." (*Telugu katha: vimarsanaatmaka vyaasa samputi*). Strangely, the same Subrahmanya Sarma registered his protest in 1976, when Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi eliminated the fiction category from their list of various genres for presenting awards.

On the same lines, a famous fiction writer and notable critic, Kethu Viswanatha Reddy commented, "Women writers did not care about short story as much as novels. ... Even writers like Sridevi, Saraladevi, Turaga Janakirani, Kalyanasundari Jagannath, Vasireddy Sitadevi, Acanta Saradadevi, Pavani Nirmala Prabhavati, Nidadavolu Malathi, and Ranganayakamma, have not developed any notable technique in short story writing. The reason is women are still lagging behind in their perception of the modern day consciousness. And what is even worse misfortune is they cannot even write in simple Telugu [*bhashaa saaralyam kuda ledu*]." (Viswanatha Reddy. *drushti*, p. 73).

These few examples would suffice to show how the criticism in the field of Telugu fiction has been changing, based on the perceptions of individuals in various periods. Up until now, Telugu people have gotten used to seeing only this kind of literary criticism, which is subjective.

Malathi's book, for a change, takes up a significant part of the contributions made by Telugu women in the field of fiction for a period of twenty-five years and presents it from a refreshingly new angle. Malathi, positioning them in their social and historical context, analyzed the themes, genres and their technique effectively.

I have no doubt that this book will be a valuable contribution to the true history of Telugu literature.

Kalpana Rentala  
Writer  
September 27, 2004  
Madison  
Wisconsin

## 1. WOMEN WRITERS

From the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the elements of tradition that seeped into women's writings in the nineteen fifties and sixties with an overspill into the mid-seventies. The female writers, encouraged by male social reformers and being in an amicable family environment, had created a trend hitherto unheard of in the history of Telugu literature, possibly, in any other Indian literature. A record number of female writers took to writing and produced voluminous amount of fiction. The publishers and magazine editors scrambled for their short stories and novels; and a few male writers took female pseudonyms to get their stories published. To my knowledge, this phenomenon is peculiar to Andhra Pradesh.

Let me start out with a couple of premises. First, the centuries-old social norms contributed to set off the women's fiction in the early nineteen fifties in their own way. In our culture, the demographics play a vital role. The greatest resource for us is humans. A family unit consists of two to three generations of people, and in our society, personal relationships are developed accordingly. The interaction between the family members—caring, sharing, interfering, teasing, and arguing— are all part of everyday life; everybody's life is everybody else's business. Our family values and personal relationships, peculiar to our culture, are developed based on our demographics.

Secondly, women have been creating songs and stories for several centuries in oral tradition in order to express their own issues and their perceptions of the world around them. The female writers of the fifties and sixties continued in that tradition; took that part of social norms, which worked for them, and weaved them into their stories. However, unlike in oral tradition, they did not limit their fiction to themselves. They wrote about a part of the society that had not been present in the extant fiction, and presented it from their own perspective.

First, let me trace the relevant elements in the women's works between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries, which serve as a background for the later writers.

In cultures such as Indian, where oral tradition is predominantly a mode of tutelage and dissemination of knowledge, the short story continues to be one more important medium. Colossal works like *Katha sarit sagaram* (Ocean of Stories) and *Pancatantram* (The Five Strategies of Polity) are a series of several stories with several layers of embedded stories and themes. In these works, the narrator starts a story, digresses into another story, building a story within the story, and returns to the first story and sums up at the end. In oral tradition, the narration continues for several nights; the listeners will have time to ruminate on the story and make mental notes. Poranki Dakshinamurti, a prominent fiction writer and critic, stated that, "not only Indians but foreigners also agreed that India is the first to explore short fiction. ... Our Vedic literature contains stories in their rudimentary form."<sup>1</sup>

The story of Dudala Salamma of Quila Shapur as narrated in *Women Writing in India*<sup>2</sup> is a present day example of a story narrated in oral tradition. The narrative highlights a few important features of the oral tradition: [1] Salamma, a woman with no formal education,

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<sup>1</sup> *Kathanika vajnmayam*. p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Tharu and Lalitha. pp. 216-224

narrated the story. For centuries, formal education for women has been substandard yet their lore, cognition and aptitude to tell a story remain indisputable. [2] Her narrative reflects her courage and strength of character; and shows for who she was—an active participant in a people’s movement<sup>3</sup>; and, [3] humility, and not self- promotion, has been one of telling virtues of Hindu philosophy for centuries, and by extension, of Indian women. Possibly, for the same reason we have no biographical details of the narrator Salamma even in this twentieth century account. Telugu women had no problem telling a story. The question of recognition and reward was a moot point even in the sixties.

I intend to address three issues in this book: Telugu women’s education and scholarship (acquisition of knowledge), their status at home and in society, and their talent as writers during the period, 1950-1975. In order to analyze the success of women writers in the fifties and sixties, we need to examine some of the stories surrounding women writers of the past. These stories tell us how women conducted themselves at home and in society, and despite the odds, continued to write in the beginning. Publishing came later.

Over the centuries, our women acquired knowledge at home through reading books either on their own or with the help of family members. There was evidence of scholarship among upper classes women—Brahmin [scholar] and Kshatriya [royalty] castes; and later, extended to other economically advantaged classes such as Vaisya [business community] and Naidu [landowner] castes.

Utukuri Lakshmikantamma (1917-1997), a female scholar of high esteem, well-versed in Sanskrit and Telugu literatures, and a noted literary historian of our times, listed more than two hundred women poets extending over ten centuries in her monumental work, *Andhra kavayitrulu* [Female poets of Andhra Pradesh], published in 1953. Some of the acclaimed female authors listed in the book were Leelavati (11<sup>th</sup> century), Tallapaka Timmakka (12<sup>th</sup> century), Gangadevi (13<sup>th</sup> century), Atukuri Molla, (14<sup>th</sup> century or 16<sup>th</sup>?), Mohanangi (15<sup>th</sup> century), and Muddupalani (18<sup>th</sup> century), to name but few. Despite their scholarship, they rarely appeared in public.

They all wrote in bhakti tradition. Bhakti calls for self-effacement. Whether it is *daiva bhakti* (devotion to god), *pati bhakti* (devotion to husband), *matru bhakti* (devotion to mother) *pitru bhakti* (devotion to father), *raja bhakti* [loyalty to the king] or *desa bhakti* [loyalty to the country, patriotism], the one underlying philosophy in all these is putting the other person’s needs or interests ahead of one’s own.

Humility or self-denigration has been a cultural value for us. For the same reason, I would not read too much into Molla’s comment, “I am no scholar ...”, as some critics would have us believe.<sup>4</sup> There are instances where male writers also attributed their talent to the divine voice. For instance, Bammara Potana, a male poet (1450-1510), stated at the beginning of his epic, *Maha Bhagavatam* (The Story of Krishna), that,

*palikedidi bhaagavatamata*  
*palikinceduvaadu raamabhadrudata*

[Bhagavatam is the name of the song, and Lord Rama caused me to sing].

Even in modern period, I have come across established writers from the fifties and sixties who would say, “I don’t consider myself a writer.”

Women in the upper classes received support and encouragement from male family members in acquiring knowledge as well as pursuing their literary skills.

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<sup>3</sup> Telangana movement, 1946-1951, was a people’s movement for a separate state.

<sup>4</sup> Tharu, Susie and Lalitha, K. *Women Writing in India*, v. 1, p. 94. Also, Review by Ashini H. Jani. 5 August 2004.

Bhaskaracharya (11<sup>th</sup> century), a notable mathematician, taught his daughter Leelavati mathematics. Leelavati authored a treatise, *Leelavati ganitamu*<sup>5</sup>, which is acclaimed as a valuable contribution in the field of mathematics to this day. I must however mention a variant of this story. There is also a contention that Leelavati was not his daughter but wife, and that Bhaskaracharya himself wrote the treatise and named it after her.

Regarding the story of Leelavati and other similar stories to follow, we need to ask ourselves why or how they had come into existence in the first place. Let me recount a couple more stories first and then address the questions.

The story of Mohanangi (16<sup>th</sup> century) is about father-daughter relationship; specifically, father encouraging daughter to write an epic. According to the story, Mohanangi was emperor Krishna Devarayalu's daughter. Lakshmikantamma narrated the story in her book, *Andhra Kavayitrulu* as follows. The original text is in Telugu (translation mine).

One day, Krishna Devarayalu went to his daughter's mansion and noticed that she was contemplative. He asked her,

You, with knotted eyebrows, seem deeply disturbed,  
What might be troubling you, dear child?

Mohanangi replied,

Father, I am contemplating not a few silly lines,  
I know not what you might think,  
But I am hoping to write an epic,  
Much to the chagrin of those who ridicule  
Female writing, and, ask why women write?  
Why not stay in the kitchen and do their chores.

Krishna Devarayalu replied,

Do let me have the pleasure of your delightful poetry.  
Until now, you turned a deaf ear to my pleas,  
You have been indifferent. ...  
In knowledge, you are no other than  
Goddess Saraswati.  
Your talent excels not only other women,  
But also the male writers, who boast of their talent.  
Some foolishly may look down on women,  
But is it not common knowledge that  
Great female scholars existed in the past.<sup>6</sup>

When I came across this passage, my first response was to take it as an indication of the existence of female scholarship in royal families and male family members' support of women's writing at the time. Later, however, I learned that my assumption was incorrect. Two learned scholars, Nayani Krishnakumari and Kolavennu Malayavasini, have informed me that there was no supported documentation for this story. Malayavasini stated that she was not questioning the scholarship of Lakshmikantamma but would like to set the record straight.

In my mind, this new information raised a few other questions: Who made up this story, when, and under what circumstances? Is it possible that a father or a daughter of ordinary means narrated his or her own experience and put it in the royal context, in an attempt to earn credibility for the story? Why would one refer to 'the ridicule of female writing' or 'great female scholars of the past', if such perceptions were not prevalent at the time?

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<sup>5</sup> Lakshmikantamma. *Andhra kavayitrulu*, p. 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> Lakshmikantamma. *Andhra Kavayitrulu*, pp. 30-31.

A second female writer I would like to discuss is Atukuri Molla. The stories surrounding her life and times are interesting. Lakshmikantamma stated Molla's time to be 1320-1400 (or 1405)<sup>7</sup>; and Arudra determined that Molla belonged to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> Once again, I would not consider this discrepancy as gender-related. Telugu history is full of such unverifiable dates concerning writers, both male and female.

Atukuri Molla, also known as Kummari Molla, belonged to potters' caste. She was a respected scholar. Molla and her father espoused Virasaivism and defied the social norms of traditional Brahmins. She decided to pursue her literary activities and remained unmarried for the same reason, which is to defy of brahminical traditions.<sup>9</sup>

Molla's major work, *Molla Ramayanam*, was written in unpretentious Telugu. The book is highly admired for its native idiom and cultural nuance, unadulterated with long winding and heavy Sanskrit phraseology. She was the second<sup>10</sup> female poet to write in pure Telugu. Arudra made a special note that, "*Molla Ramayanam* enjoys popularity even to this day while several other Ramayanams by esteemed male scholars of her times were lost in the folds of history."<sup>11</sup>

In the modern period, we have better documented evidence of men supporting women's education. The story of Bhandaru Acchamamba (1874-1904) is a case in point. In fact, her story registers both the views—for and against female education within the same family. Her younger brother, Komarraju Lakshmana Rao, a famous activist and respected journalist, encouraged her to learn to read. At the same time, other members in her family were opposed to the idea. Acchamamba was indifferent to her brother's pleas at first but later agreed. Then she took it upon herself to convince the others in her family. Eventually, she became a scholar not only in Telugu but also in Sanskrit and English, and authored a valuable historical work, *Abala Saccharitra ratnamala*.<sup>12</sup> Tharu and Lalitha stated that Acchamamba intended to write three volumes [Biographies of women in classics, Women in history, and Biographies of foreign women] but completed only the first volume; she met with a premature death at the age of 30.<sup>13</sup> She was also the first Telugu woman to start an organization for women in 1902.

Lakshmikantamma cited several instances in *Andhra kavayitrulu* where the family members had actively supported women's education and encouraged creative writing. It would also appear that, by this time, the female scholarship extended, beyond Brahmin and Kshatriya castes, to other economically advantaged classes.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Kandukuri Veeresalingam (1848-1919) initiated the women's education movement in Andhra Pradesh. His call for social reform included women's education, widow remarriage, and the eradication of prostitution. He advocated that, "the country cannot prosper unless women are educated."<sup>14</sup> His wife, Rajyalakshamma, was actively involved in his reform movements.

Veeresalingam's proposition however was not accepted by all the elitists of his times. Kokkonda Venkatratnam pantulu (1842-1915) was one of his staunch opponents regarding education for women. In his magazine, *Andhra bhasha sanjivani*, Venkatratnam pantulu published articles on the negative effects of women's education simultaneously while Veeresalingam strived to promote the positive side of it.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Samagra Andhra Sahityam*, v. 8, p. 114

<sup>9</sup> Sen, Nabaneetha dev. *Manushi* #108

<sup>10</sup> Tallapaka Timmakka was the first female poet to write in pure Telugu.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 110

<sup>12</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 105

<sup>13</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 323

<sup>14</sup> Venkata Rangayya, Mamidipudi. *Yugapurushudu Veeresalingam*, p. 37.

Narla Venkateswara Rao, better known as V. R. Narla(1908-1985), an eminent journalist and western-educated scholar, reported the debate between Veeresalingam and Venkatratnam pantulu as follows [original text in English]:

The biggest and the most long-drawn-out of his battles were for the right of a woman to education and of a widow to remarriage... The degradation of India, he affirmed, had started from the day woman was reduced to an inferior status. ... A controversy was then raging in two journals, *Andhra bhasha sanjivani* and *purushartha pradayini*, on the desirability or otherwise of giving education to women. Veeresalingam jumped into the fray with his wonted zeal. ...

About this time he launched his *Sati hitabodhini*, a monthly journal exclusively devoted to the service of women. ... In its columns, he serialized his stories of Satyavati and Chandramati, his biographical sketches of famous women, Indian and foreign, his popular guide to health, his moral maxims in verse, and his many other writings meant exclusively for women.<sup>15</sup>

Notably, Veeresalingam's course content of the education for women was not as progressive as his views on the need for women's education. In his magazine for women, *Sati hitabodhini*, started in 1883, he made his views clear in his article entitled "Uneducated women are their children's enemies". Veeresalingam stated, "If women are educated, they will refrain from using foul language and getting into brawls; and they will behave prudently and calmly. We have a proverb, 'children take after their mothers.' If women behave well, their children also will adapt good behavior. ... If mothers are stupid and petulant, their children fail in school, act cantankerously, take to evil ways, hurt others, and hurt themselves."<sup>16</sup> Veeresalingam's views on female virtue raised some controversy in his later years.

Women started writing and publishing during Veeresalingam period. This could be construed as the first departure from tradition in the history of women's writing. Lakshmikantamma mentioned that she owed her interest in the female writers of the past to Veeresalingam's writings.<sup>17</sup> In her article, *naati vidushimanulu* [female scholars of that period], she wrote about several women writers and their works, including the writings of Rajyalakshamma, Veeresalingam's wife.<sup>18</sup>

Initially women were writing on the same topics and expressing the same views as Veeresalingam. For example, some of the articles written by women during this period, *Ahalyabai* [story of Ahalya, a chaste woman in Hindu mythology], *bhaktimargamu* [tenets of devotion], and *sati dharmamulu* [duties of wife], reaffirm his views on woman's duty to her husband and family.

Kanuparti Varalakshamma (1896-1978), a multifaceted writer, gave a compelling account of the social conditions during this period in her article, "*dharmapatni Rajyalakshamma*":

After her husband [Veeresalingam] started the widow remarriage movement, it became a fierce struggle for her to maintain her relationship with her natal home. It became impossible to keep her association with the two families—her parents and the in-laws. If she wanted to stay in touch with her mother's family, she would have to leave her husband. If she had stayed with her husband, she would have to sever her ties with her parents. After considerable deliberation, she decided to stay with her husband, as is appropriate for a Hindu woman.

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<sup>15</sup> Veeresalingam, pp. 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Venkateswara Rao, Potturi. p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> *Naati vidushimanulu*, p. 98

<sup>18</sup> *Yugapurushudu Veeresalingam*, pp. 97-102



They were ostracized and she had to suffer several hardships as a result. Household help was not available anymore. She had to cook, clean, and fetch water from the river Godavari ... the list was endless.

For the same reason, she was not invited to festivities at her natal home or her neighbors' ... She had to put up with ridicule from the women in her neighborhood silently and with tears welling up in her eyes ... In addition, her husband was terribly short-tempered. He would not give her the time of day. If she tried to talk to him, he would say, 'If you can't take it, just go back to your mother.' Therefore, she had no choice but keep quiet. God only knows how she had endured such hardships.<sup>19</sup>

V. R. Narla also expressed similar views on the conditions at the home of Rajyalakshamma and Veeresalingam. [The original in English].

In a way, she bore greater burden than he had. It was easy for him to offer protection to every child widow that had come to him, seeking help. But it was Rajyalakshamma, who had to feed them, clothe them, and take care of them like a mother. That was not something any ordinary woman could handle ... More and more women were coming to them each day. She had to take care of the women from several areas, with different backgrounds and personalities. Normally, it is hard to comfort even one child widow. And, she had to deal with several child widows, with several agonizing stories.<sup>20</sup>

For centuries, Hindu philosophy has been preaching self-effacement through performing one's duty to family and society. In a familial context, *compromise is a cultural value*. The term *dharmapatni* in the title reinforces the same conviction. Literally, the term *dharmapatni* stands for a woman who carries out her duties in accordance with her husband's role in society. Rajyalakshamma lived up to those principles. Harsh as it may sound, the truth is, Veeresalingam honestly believed in what he had been preaching and he made no secret of it. She was a living example of what he had expected of a woman.

Not all women followed Veeresalingam's precepts to the letter. While a few women walked in his footsteps, others demonstrated signs of independent thinking. They managed to process the information in their own way and followed their own hearts, which was in contradiction of Veeresalingam's precepts.

The story of Battula Kamakshamma (1886- 1969), a child widow from a scholarly family, illustrates how women respected Veeresalingam for his wisdom, yet followed their own conscience in practice. She chose not to remarry but supported whole-heartedly other young child widows willing to remarry. She dedicated her life to women's cause.

Kamakshamma's autobiographical essay, a succinct four-page article, "*smruthulu, anubhavamulu*" [memories and experiences] explains how women lived with grace under trying circumstances. I was moved as much by her candid portrayal of herself and the social conditions of her time as her fortitude, determination, and courage to bring about a change in the lives of other women.

The following two brief passages highlight her perspective.

I was a child widow, about fifteen-years old in 1901-1902. I was living in my uncle's [father's brother] home. During those days, wealthy families such as ours followed tradition strictly. Women could not show their faces in public.

I do not know how it started but the spirit of service was deep-rooted in me. I would never waste a minute of my time. I was always either reading books or helping

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<sup>19</sup> Op. Cit. p. 42

<sup>20</sup> Op. Cit. p. 17

others. Although my uncle was very kind to me, I could not speak with him about my craving for books.

Some of the members on the library committee noticed that I was reading Veeresalingam's books and began sending the books on widow remarriage to me, in an attempt to influence my opinion on the subject. I was scared that it could cause problems for me if my family had come to know about them. Therefore, I gave strict instructions to the peon that he should bring only the titles I had asked for. That was the way it was in those days.

Kamakshamma's close relative and noted writer Nalam Suseelamma expressed similar sentiment:

In the early days, I was not interested in his [Veeresalingam's] reform activities. I saw Pantulu garu [Veeresalingam] three or four times but never spoke with him face to face. I could not talk even with his wife, Rajyalakshamma garu. I was attending the Brahma samaj prayers... I stopped puja at home and the holy dip in the river Godavari on special holidays. I did all this only to please my husband but not because I believed in them personally. Now, after nearly sixty years, I am looking back and thinking of those days. I know now that I have nothing to be ashamed of. I am saying this only to point out the hold the traditional values had on us during that period. I heard that saint Ramanujacharya's wife also had similar experience. She also was not sympathetic to her husband's progressive views. That story made me think of my past, and convince myself that there is nothing to be ashamed of. I am only sorry but not ashamed. ... I could not step outside past the front door in those days. Now I am running this *Andhra Mahila gaana sabha* [music society for Telugu women]. I owe it to the incessant teachings of Veeresalingam garu.<sup>21</sup>

Women in those days took upon themselves to find viable solutions when they met with hurdles. The art of "give and take" was and has been the spirit and character of Telugu women. This spirit of compromise or conformation rather than confrontation was evident in the women writers of the fifties and sixties as well. Kamakshamma and Suseelamma reaffirm the evolutionary nature of social values. Change does not happen in one quick move but takes place gradually and imperceptibly.

### **Newspapers and magazines**

By nineteen-thirties, the women's education movement gained momentum. The nationalist movement needed educated woman. The national leaders found women to be of valuable asset not only for their strength but also in terms of numbers. A little later, Ayyanki Venkataramanayya started library movement, once again with educating women as one of its primary goals.

Male activists started magazines exclusively for women and invited them to write and publish. They encouraged women to participate in running the magazines as well.

Veeresalingam started the first magazine *sati hitabodhini* exclusively for women in 1883. It ran only for four years though. *Telugu janana* was started in 1884 in Rajahmundry, a city known for its rich cultural history. *Hindusundari*, yet another magazine exclusively for women was started by S. Sitaramayya in 1902.

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<sup>21</sup>Op. Cit. pp. 95-96.

Potturi Venkateswara Rao quoted the mission statement of the editor of *Hindusundari* as follows [Translation mine]:

Considering that [*Telugu janana*] is the only magazine currently available for women, and there is no other to compete with, I decided to start this [*Hindusundari*]. ... I hope to educate women and encourage them to express themselves freely and without fear. I contacted our sisters who have been sending their articles to my other magazine, *desopakari*. They all expressed great enthusiasm at the prospect and promised to help me to make it useful for all women. Some of them offered to write and publish themselves. A few of them expressed concerns. For fear of ridicule by their female cohorts, some of them preferred to use pseudonyms ... We tried to persuade them to write and run the magazine themselves but the country has not reached that level yet, I suppose.

Further, Venkateswara Rao added:

This rather long editorial is indicative of women's interest in writing and of their fear of being ridiculed by their female friends, the determination of the publishers and the magazine editors to promote women's education and to encourage women to act as magazine editors. At the request of the editor, two women writers, Mosalikanti Rambayamma and Vempati Santhabayamma became editors. In all possibility, these two women were the first female journalists and magazine editors. Approximately, after seven or eight years, Madabhushi Chudamma and Kallepalli Venkataramanamma took the editorial responsibilities of the magazine. It was about this time that the term *sampadakulu* [Telugu term for male editors] came into vogue, and the two women coined the phrase *sampaadakuraandru* [female editors] for themselves.

The first issue of *Hindusundari* included articles on duties of wives [*pativrata dharmam*], tenets for married women, skills required in the performance of their daily chores, women's songs, articles on cosmetics, hygiene, biographies of foreign women, and leisure fiction. The stories dealing with women's education and literary interest were given priority.<sup>22</sup>

Evidently, women were invited to participate in running the magazine and women responded zealously. Interestingly enough, they also had expressed concerns of ridicule from their *female cohorts!* [Italics mine] and considered using pseudonyms. Whether they had actually used pseudonyms is not clear however.

The views on women's education expressed in *Hindusundari* were the same as those of Veeresalingam.

In the thirties, women had taken the first step towards running magazines, not only those meant exclusively for women but also the magazines for all readers. Tirumala Ramacandra (1913-2001) quoted Racamallu Satyavatidevi as the first female editor of a magazine, *Telugu talli*, which was not 'for-women-only' magazine. It was published from 1938 until 1944.<sup>23</sup> He also mentioned a female essayist Jnanamba in his book. Ramacandra quoted one full page from one of her articles [non-fiction] as an example of women's talent. The article was about the delicious nature of *sitaphalam* [winter apple] and its health benefits.<sup>24</sup> Lakshmana Reddy noted that Potham Janakamma was the first female essayist. She published her article, *videsi yatra* [foreign travel] in 1874 in *Andhra bhasha sanjivani*.<sup>25</sup> Considering the magazine was in general against women's education, the article's

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<sup>22</sup> Venkateswara Rao. p. 60

<sup>23</sup> *Telugu patrikala sahitya seva*, p. 61

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> *Telugulo patrika racana*, p. 58.

appearance in the same is significant.<sup>26</sup> It highlights the complex nature of the views expressed and upheld by individuals at any given moment.

K. N. Kesari, a nationalist leader, noted philanthropist and journalist, started *Gruhalakshmi* in 1928 providing a viable platform for women to express themselves. Kesari's mission was to "improve the health and welfare of women."

Venkateswara Rao commented:

Although this magazine was intended for women only, it was publishing highly informative articles useful and interesting for all readers. There were several articles of lasting value ... *Gruhalakshmi* provided a platform for several women writers. It promoted women's education, women's rights, and encouraged women to work on the spinning wheel at home. It also encouraged women to conduct conferences, seminars, etc. and published the news in its pages. In this magazine, the national activist Gummididala Durgabai [Durgabai Deshmukh] published her serial novel, *Lakshmi*. The story was about an orphan named Lakshmi who had survived numerous hardships and became a teacher. At the end of the novel, Durgabai addressed the readers and said, "if just one person had learned something from this story and improved her life, I will consider myself blessed."

*Gruhalakshmi* had a special place not only among women's magazines but also among all the magazines of that epoch.<sup>27</sup>

In the same context, Lakshmana Reddy observed that, "Several women, who had no knowledge of even the alphabet, worked hard to improve their reading skills and became reputable scholars eventually. ... Kanuparti Varalakshamma ran a column entitled 'Sarada lekhalu' [letters from Sarada] in which she discussed important women's issues like Sarda Act [Government Act prohibiting child marriages]<sup>28</sup>.

In addition, Kesari instituted an annual award *Swarnakankanam* (gold bracelet) to honor female writers of excellence. To this day, it is considered one of the most prestigious awards.

During this period, a few women participated in the women's reform movement. Not all women however subscribed to Veeresalingam's views. In fact, this is one more peculiarity of our culture, which continued to surface in the women's fiction in the fifties and sixties. The women's movement had supporters among men as well as women. In other words, the movement was not one of men versus women, but one of two distinct groups, each comprised of men and women. Polarization was not perception-based but not gender-based.

Among the women who appreciated Veeresalingam's movement for women's education, but not all of his convictions, Pulugurta Lakshmi Narasamamba was foremost. She was a regular contributor to *Gruhalakshmi*. In 1904, she started her own magazine, *Savitri*, "challenging Veeresalingam's position on widow remarriage and declaring war on his other movements as well. Although she opposed widow remarriage, she was a great advocate of women's education."<sup>29</sup>

In the thirties, women with minimal education improved their skills and started writing and publishing. In this context, I must mention one book for its historical significance in women's writing, although it does not fall under the category of fiction. A book entitled *Chandohamsi* [Study of meter] written by Burra Kamaladevi (1908- ?), who had no formal education, was accepted as a scholarly work and prescribed as a textbook for post-graduate

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid. pp. 57-58.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 90-91.

<sup>28</sup> *Telugu journalism*, pp. 306-307.

<sup>29</sup> Lakshmana Reddy. p. 121

study in Telugu Literature and *bhashapraveena* diploma [attestation of scholarship in Telugu language studies] in schools. That is a validation of scholarship acquired outside educational institutions.

By the end of the forties, the literary scene included publication of poetry and fiction by women writers in all magazines. Men openly encouraged women to write. Some male family members went even so far as to write and publish in the names of their wives and sisters. There was still a notable distinction though. The women writers of this period stayed within the norms set by society in terms of language and themes. That probably helped them to publish since they gave no cause for concern. This situation however changed immediately after India achieved independence in 1947.

### Recognition and reward

Publishing their writings was the first departure from the past. The second shift was in the area of recognition and reward for their writings. Attempting to put these two issues in the social context of Andhra Pradesh is a complex task. The complexities arise from the multi-layered familial relationships as well as the caste-oriented social hierarchy.

Let's first examine the question of recognition. Historically, women writers followed the protocol of the upper classes and thus recognition and reward were not a concern for them. Several biographies in Lakshmikantamma's *Andhra Kavayitrulu* included comments on the extraordinary talent of the authors but there was very little reference to the reception by the public. This custom of not seeking recognition was evident even in the sixties, to a lesser degree though, as will be shown in later chapters.

For the moment, I would like to discuss a couple of stories regarding Molla's status as a poet of repute.

We know very little about the actual environment in which Molla grew up. There is no clear evidence to show how she had acquired the interest and her talent. Generally, the upper class women in the past would not appear in public but Molla did. She went to the court of Pratapasimha, according to the account given in *Pratapacaritra* [Biography of Pratapasimha] by Ekamranatha, an early historian [translation mine].

Molla offered to dedicate her work to king Prataparudra [Pratapasimha]. The Brahmin scholars present in the court objected to her poetry as *sudrakavitvam* [work by a lower class person]. ... The king, being a scholar and appreciative of her talent, but afraid of offending the court poets, rewarded her appropriately and sent her to the queen's palace.<sup>30</sup>

I have several questions about this story. What were the circumstances that encouraged her to go to the court? How could a lower caste woman gain access to the court? How did she obtain permission to sing her Ramayana epic in the court? The argument that she went to the court to challenge the Brahmin scholars, as put forth by Nabaneetha dev Sen, is not convincing to me.<sup>31</sup>

If Molla had gone to the court to challenge the Brahmin scholars, why would she offer to dedicate her work to the king, which meant seeking his approval of her poetry? Why would she allow herself to be escorted to the queen's palace? Would that not be offensive to a poet who was determined to prove her talent to the court poets?

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Sankara Sastry. v. 8, pp. 113-114.

<sup>31</sup>. The Lady Sings the Blues. *Manushi*, #108.

A second story about Molla also is interesting not for the questionable details but for the interpretations it opens up to. Both Lakshmikantamma and Arudra made only brief references to the story in their books. The story was:

One day, Molla was returning home carrying a chicken and a puppy in her arms. Tenali Ramakrishna, a contemporary poet known for pulling pranks on fellow writers, saw her and, as was his custom, saw an opportunity to make fun of her. He asked Molla if she would let him have the chicken or the puppy for a rupee. The question was a double entendre. At one level, it was a simple question—whether she would sell the chicken or puppy to him for a rupee; and, on another level, an obscenity.

Molla understood the twist and gave him a reply, which was also a double entendre, matching his wits. Her response at one level meant that she would not sell anything to him at any cost; and, on another level, meant 'Whatever your intentions are, you know I am like a mother to you'. The story continues to state that, thenceforth Ramakrishna treated her with respect appropriate for mother.

The story raises several questions concerning the status of women in society in general and of women poets in particular. Is this a story of humiliation or success? Does this mean that women poets were subjected to ridicule? Or is it intended to show that women equaled men in a battle of wits? Ramakrishna is known to have played practical jokes on his male contemporaries as well, and at times, ended up at the receiving end himself. In that sense, can we assume that he treated Molla the same way he would any other poet, irrespective of gender?

I quoted this story to point out a cultural trait peculiar to Telugu literature. In Telugu literature, there is a genre called *tittu kavitvam* [poetry of slander]. For centuries, it has been a common practice for Telugu writers, especially male writers, to deride each other. Personal attacks and defamation of character have been national traits for centuries. What is considered an offense in the west is a trivial matter for Telugu people. Comments like "d--d mobs of scribbling women" (Hawthorne) or comparing women's writing to "a dog walking on his hind legs" (Johnson) are dismissed easily in our culture. This trend of personal attacks is widespread in Andhra Pradesh and continued into the seventies and eighties. It did not however deter Telugu women from writing and publishing as will be shown later.

The second female writer to make history was Muddupalani (1730-1790). To my knowledge, Muddupalani was the first female poet to trigger the gender-specific and caste-oriented discussion in Telugu literature.

Muddupalani was granddaughter of Tanjanayaki, a courtesan in Tanjore court during the Pratapasimha regime (1730-1763). Muddupalani wrote *Radhikasantvanam*, in which she included detailed descriptions of lovemaking. Relevant to our discussion is the controversy surrounding its publication nearly two centuries later. In 1910, when Bangalore Nagaratnamma, a scholar and poet in her own right, attempted to publish the book, she met with strong opposition. Ironically, both the opposition and banning of the book came from the British government.

Among the Telugu elite, Veeresalingam was one of her harshest critics. He condemned Muddupalani's amorous descriptions as inappropriate for the public. Arudra recorded the account of Veeresalingam's objections and Nagaratnamma's rebuttal as follows [Translation mine]:

Veeresalingam commented that several references in the book were disgraceful and inappropriate for women to hear or write about.

Bangalore Nagaratnamma questioned Veeresalingam's honesty in her rebuttal. She asked, "Do the questions of propriety and embarrassment arise only in the case of

women writers, and not men writers? Is he [Veeresalingam] implying that it is not acceptable for this author [Muddupalani] to write about conjugal pleasures and without reservation? Is it because she was a courtesan? Is it acceptable for respectable men to write about them? In that case, my question is, 'Are the obscenities in this book (of Muddupalani) worse than the obscenities in *vaijayantivilasam*, Pantulu garu [Veeresalingam] personally reviewed and approved for publication?' And what about the obscenities in his book, *rasika jana manobhiranjanam*?"<sup>32</sup>

This heated discussion, which was published in magazines in the early twentieth century, is an example that women did not hesitate to rise to the occasion and register their protest when occasion called for it.

Muddupalani's book, *Radhikasantvanam*, was eventually published because of the efforts of a few liberal-minded male scholars. In their appeal to the government, they stated, "It is unfair to ban the entire book simply because it contained some two dozen objectionable verses." The ban was not lifted until after the British rule had ended though.

Some of the Andhra elite considered the book worthy of publication and got it published eventually. Yet the stigma persists even to modern times, as is evident from some of the critiques published as late as 2002. A comment posted on the Internet in Vepachedu pages is subjective. It states, "She [Muddupalani] wrote *Radhikasantvanam* to prove that women can write lust and sex as well as or even better than men! Being a *Vesya* (concubine or prostitute) it was not difficult for her to write about lust and sex."<sup>33</sup> [Original in English]. Lakshmikantamma, in her book published in 1953, paid remarkable tribute to Muddupalani's poetic excellence and her command of diction, yet added, "With her explicit descriptions of sexual acts, the author made it impossible for scholarly discussion of her work in respectable company". However, she was quick to defend the writer's position, "We cannot however blame Muddupalani entirely for this. The country was under military rule at the time. It was a chaotic period."<sup>34</sup>

I quoted these examples to point out the hazy line between the perceptions of men and women in our culture. Individuals from both genders expressed their views based on their own beliefs, irrespective of gender.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a few female writers like Kommuri Padmavatidevi and Kanuparti Varalakshamma started writing modern day fiction. Since women participated in the freedom movement along with their fathers, brothers, and husbands, they started expressing their perceptions in their writings. It came naturally to them.

Bhandaru Acchamamba was the first writer to write short stories. One of her stories, "strividya" [Women's education]<sup>35</sup> was about a woman who could not read or write, was not even motivated to learn to read despite her husband's encouragement. Later however, after he was jailed as a freedom fighter, she found a reason to learn to read and write. She wanted to communicate with him. The story highlights a side of human nature, which is, a person needs sufficient motivation and justification to learn a skill and this is particularly true of women. Needless to mention that Acchamamba herself was not motivated to learn to read, at first, although not under the same circumstances.

At the risk of repetition, let me recapture briefly the biographies of the pioneers in women's writing.

Kanuparti Varalakshamma wrote a series of articles under the title, *Sarada lekhalu* [Letters of Sarada] in which she discussed several contemporary issues relevant to women,

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<sup>32</sup> Sankara Sastry, Bhagavatula. "pravesika"[preface] Muddupalani. *Radhikasantvanam*. p. xx.

<sup>33</sup> Vepachedu. Homepage.

<sup>34</sup> Lakshmikantamma. *Andhra kavayitrulu*. p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> *HIndusundari* magazine, 1902.

and was acclaimed for her insights. She was the first recipient of the prestigious *swarnakankanam* award in 1934 and Sahitya Akademi award in 1966.

She participated in the freedom movement, was a follower of Gandhi, and an activist. She founded a women's organization and dedicated her life to improving the lot of women. Her first story was published in *Anasuya* monthly, a women's magazine, in 1918.

Kommuri Padmavatidevi (b.1908- ?) was a recipient of the *swarnakankanam* award in 1956. She was well versed in Telugu, Kannada, and English. She was the first female feature columnist. First she ran a weekly column *Pramadavanam* and later, *mahila* in *Anandavani*. In addition to writing fiction, she was a celebrated performing artist. She also broadcast several programs for women and children on the All India Radio.

Illindala Saraswatidevi (1918-1998) had a high school diploma and a diploma in journalism; ran a feature column, *vanitaalokam* [the world of women] in *Andhra Patrika* weekly. Received the Central Sahitya Akademi award in 1958 and *swarnakankanam* award. Her anthology of one hundred stories, *swarnakamalaalu*, was published in 1981. In her preface to the anthology, she mentioned that she had been writing for a long time before she started publishing in 1949, and that Kuruganti Sitaramayya, a famous freedom fighter, encouraged her to submit her stories first to All India Radio for broadcasting, and later, to the literary monthly, *Bharati*. In addition to the short stories, she had written several novels, plays, essays, biographies; and also stories, plays and songs for children.

Utukuri Lakshmikantamma (1917-1997) was a celebrated poet, scholar in Sanskrit and Telugu, and esteemed critic. Her literary activities included organizing the first conference of Telugu women writers in 1963 under the auspices of the state government; and her monumental work, *Andhra kavayitrulu* [Telugu women poets], which won Madras Government Literary award in 1953. It is critically acclaimed in literary circles, and remains a reference tool for researchers to this day. She received *swarnakankanam* award.

These accounts are intended to highlight the multifaceted talent of our women writers in the twentieth century.

Finally, let me note one more movement that played a huge part in the women's writing in the fifties. It was in the area of language. With numerous experimentations in journalism, the medium of communication became an issue in the early twentieth century. Gidugu Rammurti Pantulu (1863-1940) initiated *vyavahaarika bhasha vaadam*, advocating the use of colloquial Telugu in magazines and newspapers. Although, in the early stages, it was limited to language of the polite society [*sishta jana vyavahaarikam*], the language as being used today, with several dialectal variations, came to be used in the media only after the declaration of independence, possibly to attract more readers, especially those with minimal education.

It is in this environment that the fiction by women writers increased exponentially in the early fifties. Their education level rose from elementary to high school diploma, and then, to college degrees, although not in significant numbers. To put it another way, formal education did not play a tangible role either in increasing the number of women writers or readership. Suffice to say that the women writers were creating fiction successfully, and their success lay primarily in two areas: their choice of themes and command of diction.

The women writers of the fifties decade started writing about their life and familial relationships—mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and neighbors; and then, extended to umpteen other issues that filled their homes. They wrote about these themes in a language that drove the point home in readers' hearts.

To summarize, historically, education was available to women in upper and middle class families. After the declaration of independence, the abolition of zamindaris and princely



states, women from the royal/ruling class also became middle class. The new middle class began developing a new set of values, which changed dramatically because of the social and political changes in the country. The perceptions of the female writers changed from *bhakti* tradition first to patriotism and romanticism in the first half of the twentieth century, and later, to the awareness of their identities in the second half of the twentieth century.

Secondly, the controversies surrounding women's education was not gender-specific. The dissent was between two groups, each group consisting of males and females, rather than two distinctive groups of males and females.

A third distinction was between the academy and the public, which is a modern concept. With the popularization of the adult and women's education, the non-scholar readership increased exponentially, and it was responding to the fiction by women writers with great enthusiasm, irrespective of the academic evaluation of the same. That provided an exceptionally large platform for female fiction writers.

By the late seventies, the establishment recognized them as eminent writers and began conferring honorary degrees on them. The women writers also became subjects of study for the master of philosophy degrees and doctoral dissertations at the universities in south India.

In the following chapters, I will attempt to explore how the women writers of the fifties and sixties carried themselves in literature and in society against this backdrop of complex familial and social web. I hope to identify the traditional values these writers had continued to cherish, and note where they had deviated from the beaten path and became pioneers for the women of the future generations.

The familial and social status of women writers and the social conditions had been a contributory factor in the success of the women writers in the fifties and sixties.

## 2. FAMILIAL STATUS and SOCIAL CONDITIONS

In the preceding chapter, I attempted to trace some of the trends regarding women's education in upper classes and their creative writing, which was mostly poetry. In this chapter, I shall examine the next stage in the evolution of women's writing—a spirited mix of tradition and innovation. In some areas, they continued to adopt the practices of the past, and in others, they became dynamic and established their own identity, both at home and in society.

A major shift took place in two areas: In genres, they shifted from poetry to fiction; and in terms of their audience, they moved from private to public, from self to society. Significantly, they kept operating from home, which was a contributory factor in enlisting the family support, while expressing their uncharacteristic views, as will be shown later. The women writers of the fifties and sixties still confined themselves to appearing in print only. Most of them were not ready to make public appearance.

Women started writing fiction in the second half of the twentieth century. Kalipatnam Rama Rao, an esteemed writer, summarized the history of the women's fiction in the fifties and sixties as follows:<sup>36</sup>

After achieving independence, the government helped people to open high schools under the newly implemented 5-Year Plans even in small villages in remote corners just for the asking. Formal education for girls was already put in place by then. The girls who had received education up to the fifth or sixth grade advanced to the high school level. By then, the number of high schools in cities had multiplied as well. It took seven to eight years to reach this stage.

A second development was in the area of printing. Government loans and investment opportunities played a key role in increasing the number of printing presses. The weekly and monthly magazines started several link magazines [subsidiary organs] in the sixties in order to recover their investment. For instance, *Andhra jyoti weekly* started *Bala jyoti* for children and *Vanita jyoti* for women. With the proliferation of magazines and link magazines, a need to feed them followed. The magazines needed contributors as well as editors. Educated individuals with a sense of social responsibility became editors, which, in turn, produced "social consciousness" writers. That eventually led to competition among the magazines for capturing the largest readership. This spirit of competition forced them, of necessity, to identify and develop a paradigm to attract readers. The focus became not "What is good for the general public" but "What the public want to read". That caused a major change in the literary trends of the time.

At this time, women were educated but had not entered the job market yet. Married women stayed home as housewives while others were waiting for their parents to find bridegrooms with higher qualifications. They were buying and reading these magazines for pastime. Eventually, they started writing about their experiences and aspirations. Some of the women writers like Ranganayakamma had already started writing social consciousness fiction at this time.

The educated women felt a need to be recognized as individuals. It was showing in their writings; their yearning to be noticed and understood was apparent in their stories. Oddly enough, they also would accept the woman's position as *charanadasi* [waiting on one's husband]. In other words, they had no clear-cut idea regarding what

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<sup>36</sup> Rama Rao, Kalipatnam. *Interview*. 13 October 2002.

they wanted. Their views were still in the emerging stage, so to speak. The magazines kept encouraging them, nevertheless.

The third development in the fifties was a change in the social system and the formation of a new leisure class among women. The government plans, the bureaucracy, bribery, etc. helped people to amass wealth. The newly introduced kitchen gadgets had created plenty of leisure for women. To make use of their leisure time, women depended on the magazines.

Eventually, women entered the workforce and they continued to read the magazines even at work. They would keep these magazines in the desk drawers in the offices and read them. The offices were hiring people in large numbers, especially women, since it was a woman's [Indira Gandhi] regime. Thus, women had no problem in finding the time to read magazines.

Popularity of women writers reached a point where men had to take female pseudonyms to be known as writers. That is my perception, anyway.

A fourth development was in the perceptions of the editors. Normally, they would follow the trends of the readers' views. Some of the new editors, however, either because of their fear of competition or ignorance, resorted to the most disgraceful crime, which is to ignore the literary values. Both the readers and the editors must take responsibility for this failing on the part of the magazines.

In response to one of my questions, Rama Rao mentioned that he considers Ranganayakamma, Usharani Bhatia, and K. Ramalakshmi as "social consciousness" writers. Not many women writers are perceptive and/or possess a sense of literary values, he added.

The account sums up the historical perspective of women's writing during the two decades in question. I will try to elaborate on some of his comments, and discuss other aspects.

## **AT HOME**

Before discussing the unprecedented success of women writers in Andhra Pradesh, let us review their education, familial and economic status in the fifties and sixties.

### **Education**

In families even with moderate income, sending girls to public schools started in the late nineteenth century. By mid-twentieth century, young women were receiving formal education up to high school level. Nevertheless, majority of women were reading the classics in Telugu, English, Hindi, Sanskrit and other languages at home.

To quote but a few, Lata attended school up to fifth grade, but later studied Telugu and Sanskrit classics under her father's tutelage. Sulochana Rani has high school diploma and later read fiction extensively. Malati Chendur finished high school and later improved her knowledge through self-education. Ranganayakamma finished high school, and later studied other literatures, including Marxist literature and became an avowed Marxist. Several other writers like Koduri Kausalya Devi, Adimadhyam Ramanamma, Polkampalli Santa Devi, Polapragada Rajyalakshmi, and Pavani Nirmala Prabhavati had not attended college but they all had written and published voluminous literature and made their mark on the history of Telugu fiction.

A few writers attended college. Acanta Saradadevi attended college up to M.A. in English but did not take the exam. Later she obtained her master's in Telugu. In addition, she was well versed in Hindi, Sanskrit and Music. Vasireddy Sitadevi obtained a master's degree in Social Work and Sahitya Ratna diploma in Hindi. Sitadevi said that her family was opposed to her attending public school but did not object to her studying at home. Her father even arranged a proctor to come from Madras (overnight trip by train) to facilitate the completion of the required exam for her high school diploma. Bhanumati Ramakrishna attended first year of college and passed the exam ranking first. Later she obtained her bachelor's degree in psychology. A few writers like C. Anandaramam, Mannem Sarada, and P. Sridevi completed university education and held jobs as professors, engineers, and physicians. Saraladevi obtained college degree and continued to write fiction from home. Ramalakshmi received college education and worked as a sub-editor in a bi-weekly magazine for some time. She became full-time writer and critic later. In response to my questions, R. Vasundhara Devi sent me the following account about her education (the original in English):

The thirties were exciting times with many political and social upheavals in the wind. Ours was a conservative family and I, a pre-teen, was not an active participant but was in touch with the social changes.

The village Vetapalem was the home of one of the earliest libraries in Andhra Pradesh, *Saraswata Niketanam*. My mother inculcated a healthy respect for education in her daughters, although she herself was not educated.

My sister Kamala and I were avid readers of children's books. We read myths, puranas, epics, and *Pancatantram* stories and absorbed every word as God's truth. Saraswata Niketanam was a clean, spacious place. My sister and I used to borrow more books than was normally allowed by pleading with, coaxing and pestering the library clerk, Mr. Kamayya. I still have a memory of—a feeling of great freedom, unfettered imagination, and open space, full of clean, golden sands everywhere.

I studied in Bandla Bapayya Hindu middle school. Sri Abbaraju Suryanarayana, our very conscientious Telugu teacher, insisted on our learning Telugu words, including the etymology of each word. He made us learn all the required poems with word-by-word meanings, meter, and all the relevant grammar. I owe my knowledge of Telugu to him and acknowledge my gratitude to him.

I was 13 when I finished the eighth grade. Since our traditions banned our mixing with boys, my father bundled me off to an all-girl boarding school with English as medium and that put an end to my further Telugu learning.

At home, we had a chest full of books, mostly a collection of *My Magazine* from my father's medical school days. When I came home for vacations, I would burrow happily into the old chest; I loved the light humor of the magazine—the funny stories, the *sardar* jokes, the skits, and all. I wrote occasionally for school and children's magazines.<sup>37</sup>

In the early eighties, I went to Andhra Pradesh to interview writers, editors, and readers. During my interviews, several writers mentioned famous foreign writers (Tolstoy, Hardy, Pearl S. Buck, Cronin, Oscar Wilde, Steinbeck, Maupassant, O'Henry, and Marie Corelli) and Indian writers (Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore [Bengali writers] and Kalki [Tamil writer]) as their favorite writers. Among the Indian writers, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee remains the most popular writer of all times in Telugu homes.<sup>38</sup> It is important to remember that Bengal stood foremost in the Indian freedom movement and

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<sup>37</sup> Email dated 6 September 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Ramalakshmi, K. Comp. *Andhra racayitrula samacara sucika*.

the women's movement in the late nineteenth century. Their influence on Telugu women's writing has been noticeable.

### **Marital status**

Regarding marriage, most of these writers have shown some kind of independent thinking. Each of them seemed to have taken a stand in their own way.

Acanta Saradadevi mentioned that she had opportunity to read books after her marriage with Janakiram in 1944. Malati Chendur married her maternal uncle at the age of 16. Responding to a question by Sivasankari, whether her husband had supported her in her literary career, Malati Chendur responded, "If Chendur had not married me his life would have progressed along different lines. He would have had seven or eight children and would be roaming around on a cycle with vegetable baskets."<sup>39</sup> [Original in English]. In June 2001, I requested her to elaborate on that comment, asking if her comment meant that she was the smarter one between the two of them. Malati did not respond but her husband N. R. Chendur responded to my question. He wrote, "Malati was being frivolous." Further, he gave another incident, in which she was quoted as saying, "People refer to me as Saraswati [Goddess of Learning], and I'd say he [husband] is the Brahma [the creator and husband of Saraswati] who made me Saraswati"<sup>40</sup> [Original in English].

Ramalakshmi was also facetious about her relationship with her husband, Arudra, an acclaimed writer, critic and literary historian. Ramalakshmi said their first encounter was when Ramalakshmi had asked him to write a preface for her first anthology, *vida deese railuballu* [the trains that separate people]. She said that he had written the preface, but never read her writings after that.<sup>41</sup>

These stories speak of the complementary and congenial nature in husband-wife relationship in our culture. It is common for couples to be casual, humorous and exchange witty remarks without being offensive.

Vasireddy Sitadevi said she resisted her parents' attempts to arrange her marriage and went to Madras to pursue her studies.

Ranganayakamma had an arranged marriage at the age of 20, separated at 26, and divorced at 32. She later married her friend and professor, nine years younger than herself ("make a note of it; it is important," she said to me at the interview). Her husband introduced her to Marxist literature, which encouraged her to study further and write books on the subject.

Evidently, Telugu women attached very little importance to the fact whether their marriage was arranged or otherwise. If the marriage was arranged, they worked through and developed a healthy relationship. In the cases where the relationship went sour, they took the matters into their own hands and resolved their issues in ways they deemed fit.

### **Familial status**

Literary heritage was a contributory factor in their self-expression. In a recent interview, Turaga Janakirani stated that her mother and aunt were writers, and she was related to Gudipati Venkata Chalam (1894-1979), a highly controversial writer. Chaganti Tulasi is daughter of Chaganti Somayajulu (1915-1994), a reputable progressive writer.

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<sup>39</sup> Sivasankari. Interview. 247.

<sup>40</sup> Personal correspondence. 7 July 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Ramalakshmi, K. "acchaina naa modati pustakam." *Andhra jyoti weekly* 4 June 1984. pp. 48-49.

Usharani Bhatia is daughter of Kommuri Padmavatidevi who had published extensively during the period, 1930-60.

Kalyanasundari Jagannath stated that she wrote her first story at the insistence of a family friend and writer, Mallampalli Somasekhara Sarma. She wrote a story and showed it to him. He read it and took it to the office of *Bharati* himself; and it was published right away. Kalyanasundari also quoted Somasekhara Sarma as saying, "I knew you could write but did not expect it to be this good." A second comment she had received was from famous poet, Sri Sri. He even promised to translate her story into English, never did so though. He advised her, "In future, try to write tragedies without killing your heroes"<sup>42</sup>.

Ranganayakamma said that her father had encouraged her in her teen years to write for a caste-oriented journal he had been running. She mentioned that her caste, *padmanayaka caste*, was known for the sport of cockfighting. She hated the sport and developed a hatred for the caste system eventually. In her later writings, it took a much stronger tone. She added that her father used to subscribe to popular magazines, which helped her to develop an interest in reading books.

The experiences of Turaga Janakirani and D. Kameswari summarize women writers' experiences concerning the response from family members. Turaga Janakirani, responding to my question whether her family members encouraged her to write, said:

If you are asking me whether somebody came to me with a pen and paper and told me to sit down and write, the answer is no. I wrote whatever and whenever I felt like writing. The publishers and magazine editors encouraged me. I was even proud of my writings since whatever I sent was published right away. Sometimes, the editors would write back to me with comments on my stories. Gora Sastry, editor of *Telugu swatantra*, was one of such editors.

In addition, I am not afraid to speak my mind. For instance, I know Chalam [her mother's uncle] possessed excellent philosophy but it was not well balanced; his vision was lopsided at best, and I told him so. I've written my views on his philosophy in my book, *maa taatayya Chalam* [my grandfather Chalam]. He liked me a lot. That does not mean I have to agree with everything he had said.<sup>43</sup>

This kind of free interaction of writers with family members has always been part of our culture.

D. Kameswari said she started writing after her marriage.<sup>44</sup> She was a voracious reader; used to read anything and everything she could lay hands on. She said:

I have read Chalam and Kovvali novels also, sneaking behind my parents back [the novels were viewed as objectionable by most of the parents for supposedly their adult content]. I am just a housewife. I did not go to college. I started writing only after my three children were born. Nobody said anything about my stories one way or the other. Occasionally, my husband would read and say something if he felt like. I never felt I was being mocked for writing stories.

Money has never been a motivation. I admit it feels good to see a few rupees as my own. It is not much but still gratifying. That certainly never has been a motivation for me to write.

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<sup>42</sup> Kalyanasundari Jagannath. "kathalu raayadam elaa?" Sarvari. Comp. *Kathalelaa rastaaru?* pp. 8-15.

<sup>43</sup> Interview. 5 October 2002.

<sup>44</sup> Interview. 7 October 2002.

R. Vasundhara Devi, responding to my question whether she and her husband, R. S. Sudarsanam, critic and scholar, discussed her writings, wrote to me (the original in English):

I had read almost all of my husband's literary works before publication. He did not tell me to read or not to read his manuscripts.

He would read my stories only after they had been published. He never made any comment. I remember however, he telling a newspaper interviewer that I would never accept his suggestions or make changes.

But we discussed religious and spiritual matters; that is one area where we traveled together.<sup>45</sup>

At my home, I never thought my family had noticed my writing. For me, it was just a part of every day activities. Now, looking back, I can recall a couple of incidents that could be construed as encouragement. On one occasion, my father took me to the *Andhraprabha* weekly office [a two-hour trip by bus]. My sister subscribed to *Readers Digest* in my name during my teen years. My mother would suggest reading stories of Hindu saints. I am not sure whether it was supposed to be my religious training or the beginning of my writing career, but the stories certainly captured my interest. My uncle, and writer, Nidadavolu Lingamurti, once commented on a children's story I had written for a children's magazine. That is about it. Like most of the women of my time, I was reading whatever I could lay my hands on. Nobody in my family objected to my reading Lata or Chalam [both unacceptable by the standards of some families at the time]. Nobody in my family ever said anything that could dampen my spirits. In recent years, my second brother, Sitarama Rao has taken an active interest in my writings and been supportive of my literary activities.

From what I have known and seen in interviews with the writers, it would appear that women in the middle-class families had not met with opposition; they did not have to conceal their writings for fear of ridicule. In one instance, her husband kept answering my questions while the writer kept quiet. Later I came to know that there was a tragedy in the family, and he was helping her to cope with the loss. In another instance, husband served us coffee and snacks while we were talking. Sometimes, men were present in the room but only as audience. In some families, brothers did some writing but that did not hinder women from writing. Sulochana Rani said she used to fair copy her brother's fiction, which encouraged her to try writing herself. She also said that when her first story was published, the family members thought it was her brothers' story, and he published it in her name. The brother had to convince the family that *she* wrote the story and not him.

My impression from my interviews and personal experience has been one of positive note. In saying so, I am aware that I am stepping on a slippery ground. In recent years, a few of the sixties and seventies writers have been expressing opinions contrary to my perception. I shall address this topic later.

The negative attitude towards women writers and ridicule started in the mid-seventies after the women writers had reached the height of their success.

### **Economic status**

Economic status did not play a crucial role in women's writing in the early fifties. In the past, supporting the family was not woman's responsibility. Therefore, economics was not part of the equation. The situation has changed drastically after women entered the workforce. Ironically, the question became not one of economic freedom but of economic status. In general, even when women had the money, they were not in a position to spend

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<sup>45</sup> Email dated 8 September 2004.

it as they pleased. The new economic status women had achieved hardly worked to their advantage. The educated woman was caught up in a double bind. The writers I spoke with stated unequivocally that income was not a motivation for them or their families. This situation had been a major theme in the fiction of the fifties and sixties highlighting the fact that women writers were aware of the irony in the educated women's predicament.

One of the major contentions of the western critics has been that the women writers did not succeed in the field of literature due to lack of economic freedom. Famous Indian writers like Kamala Das and Anita Desai subscribe to this argument. In Andhra Pradesh, however, to the best of my knowledge, economics did not play a role in the women's writing during the period under discussion. Koganti Vijayalakshmi, a contemporary writer, stated that Telugu women never wrote in the past or present to make money but only to satisfy their internal craving to express themselves; and secondly, to fulfill their obligation towards society, which again is a modern concept.<sup>46</sup>

In the past, financial aspect was not a concern for women. With the advent of modernization in the post-independent India, the power of currency has come to dominate giving rise to a different set of values.

In the late fifties, publishers and magazine editors started offering remuneration for fiction. Not all but most of the popular magazines like *Andhra Patrika* and *Andhraprabha* were offering nominal amounts for stories published in their magazines. Some magazines of good standing, like *Telugu swatantra* and *Bharati*, offered no financial reward to my knowledge. (In a recent interview, a famous male writer told me that he had insisted on being paid and had been paid by *Telugu swatantra*).

In those days, getting a story published in *Bharati* was an honor in itself. Several women writers like Dwivedula Visalakshi and Kalyanasundari Jagannath found their way into literary circles through their publications in *Bharati*.

A few writers mentioned about the economic constraints at home during their childhood. Malati Chendur said that she was only six months old when her father died and her mother had to assume family responsibilities by herself. Ranganayakamma referred to the financial constraints at home in her younger days. Significantly, in both the cases, the family's financial problems did not curb their creativity. In fact, no woman writer had mentioned that her family discouraged her from writing for any reason, economic or some other.

Ranganayakamma mentioned about her financial hardships after separation from her first husband. She said she moved to Hyderabad for eye surgery, and stayed with friends, who were also her fervent readers and supporters of her writing career. Referring to their kindness, she quoted a popular Telugu proverb, which roughly translates as, "I can't settle their debt even if I had given my skin to make sandals for them."<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, while attacking ferociously the male domination and female oppression in her writings, she also succeeded in gathering a large circle of male friends.

The point I am trying to make is Telugu women writers received support from their families, publishers, magazines, and the readers, while expressing their views in their fiction, antagonistic at times, during this particular period.

## IN SOCIETY

For women writers of this era, the situation outside was similar to the environment at home. Up until the achievement of independence, the country was focused on the fight for

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<sup>46</sup> Visakha Literary meet, October 12, 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Interview. *Gamanam* 14-16.



freedom, in which women participated actively. After achieving independence in 1947, the next logical step was to rebuild the nation in step with other developing countries, which meant educating the masses, men and women. As a result, an overall reevaluation and renovation of traditional values took place.

The three major movements, namely, the social reform movement, the independence movement, and the library movement, contributed immensely to popularize women's writing and explore women's creativity. Just in one decade, from 1920 to 1930, the number of Telugu magazines had nearly doubled, from 136 to 240.<sup>48</sup> Several of them were caste-oriented reflecting the strong community bond within the castes.

### **Weekly and monthly magazines**

While most of the women writers in the previous generation continued to publish in the magazines exclusively for women like *Hindusundari* and *Gruhalakshmi*, a new generation of writers started writing fiction and publishing in the magazines that were not marked 'for women only'. Popular magazines like *Andhra Patrika*, *Andhraprabha*, *Bharati*, and *Telugu swatantra* welcomed fiction by women writers with great enthusiasm. Although they were not marked exclusively for women, the magazines were instrumental in promoting women's writing, especially fiction. Most of these editors and publishers were freedom fighters and champions of the women's movement in the past, and as such, entertained liberal views.

*Andhra Patrika*, started in 1908 by Kasinathuni Nageswara Rao, was the first weekly magazine, which promoted progressive views. The publisher's mission statement was, "We hope to provide knowledge relating to our society and the world for all our people."<sup>49</sup> Significantly, unlike in the past, the magazine did not identify women as a separate class requiring education. Nevertheless, *Andhra Patrika* featured several women writers. The magazine was a great success enjoying a subscription membership of 2000, which was considered big at the time.<sup>50</sup>

A second magazine, *Bharati* monthly, also started by the same publisher, Nageswara Rao, became a milestone for its high literary standards. Although most of the writers/scholars were male, *Bharati* also featured women writers like Turaga Janakirani, Dwivedula Visalakshi, K. Ramalakshmi, Illindala Saraswatidevi, Kalyanasundari Jagannath, Malati Chendur, and other prominent women writers of the time.

The third magazine among these trendsetters was *Andhraprabha* weekly, launched in 1938. Narla Venkateswara Rao, known for his sophistication and several innovations in journalism because of his western education, was its editor. He was with the magazine as the chief editor from 1942 to 1959. Under his leadership, the magazine's circulation went up from 500 in 1942 to 72,000 in 1959. The weekly magazine gave importance not only to political issues but also to social, economic, industrial, and educational issues, and thus, laid foundation for new trends in journalism.<sup>51</sup> One of them relevant for our discussion was the feature column *Pramadavanam* with Malati Chendur as the columnist. The column was an instant success and made Malati Chendur a household name. Referring to her accomplishment, Malati stated, "I have dealt with all topics under the sun in a series of articles and in a 'question and answer' format for over 45 years."<sup>52</sup>[The original in English]. The topics ranged from beauty tips to health, and family counseling. She also included short introductions to foreign women writers. In her interview with me in 1982, Malati mentioned

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<sup>48</sup>Lakshmana Reddy. *Telugu Journalism*. p. 215

<sup>49</sup>Ibid. p. 382

<sup>50</sup>Ibid. pp. 381-387

<sup>51</sup>Ibid. pp. 397-99

<sup>52</sup>Sivasankari. v. 1. p. 246.

that she had been taking some of the ideas from foreign magazines like *Ladies Home Journal*. This feature could be one of the many reasons for the circulation of *Andhraprabha* to reach the astronomical figures mentioned earlier.

In the early fifties, *Telugu swatantra* also encouraged women writers. Gora Sastry and Khasa Subba Rao were editors of *Telugu swatantra* at the time. K. Ramalakshmi, Ranganayakamma, Turaga Janakirani, P. Saraladevi, and Nidadavolu Malathi were some of the writers who were introduced through this biweekly magazine.

Another magazine that made enormous service to women writers was *Andhra jyoti* weekly, which was started in July 1960 with Narla Venkateswara Rao as its chief editor. I have no record of the precise date when Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma joined the magazine but he was one of the editors supportive of women writers.

### **Magazine editors and magazine circulation numbers**

During my interviews with women writers, several of them mentioned that the magazine editors encouraged them. The names included Narla Venkateswara Rao, Gora Sastry, Khasa Subba Rao, and Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma. Other weekly and monthly magazines like *Sahiti*, *Swati*, *Yuva*, *Tharuna*, and *Jayasri* also were publishing fiction by women writers extensively. In this regard, a comment made by Ranganayakamma is noteworthy. She commented that, in the early years of her writing, the magazine editors were publishing anything she had sent in.<sup>53</sup> In my recent trip to Andhra Pradesh, I spoke with a few writers, Turaga Janakirani, D. Kameswari, and P. Satyavati for instance, and they all stated that their stories were never rejected, and had never been edited. Kameswari said that her stories were almost never rejected; and if one magazine returned her story, she would send it to another magazine and got it published.

After talking with several writers and from my own experience, I concluded that the magazine editors were less critical of women's writing during this period.

By early sixties, some of the women writers reached significant position, which had substantial impact on magazine circulations. Magazine editors started to accommodate the demands of the women writers zealously. They were willing to accommodate the terms of top ranking women writers such as Sulochana Rani, Kausalyadevi, Ranganayakamma, and Lata. They were willing to pay higher remuneration, sometimes twice as much as the male writers, accept incomplete works, publish without editorial intervention; and sign contracts without receiving even an outline for serial novels! The trend seemed to have continued into the eighties. In December 1982, I picked up a couple of monthly catalogs of commercial publishers, in which I found the ratio of fiction by female writers to that of male writers staggering. In one instance, the ratio was 120 to 6! In January 1983, two editors of highly circulated weekly magazines, *Andhra jyoti weekly* (with a circulation of 100,000) and *Andhraprabha Weekly* (with a circulation of 80,000) expressed the view that, in sheer numbers, the women writers outnumbered the male writers, and that the names of women writers were a contributory factor in increasing their circulation figures. In 1977, Subrahmanya Sarma stated that the weekly and monthly magazines were publishing 200 novels and 1500 short stories a month on average, and that the unpublished fiction would be ten times as many.<sup>54</sup> His other comments were, "Our magazines contributed immensely to promoting colloquial Telugu. We are living in an age of *mediocracy* [sic]. Only mediocre writing is receiving awards and honors. Nonetheless, our writers have brought us remarkable readership." He also said, "Only educated women in our families picked up the

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<sup>53</sup> Ranganayakamma. Interview. *Gamanam*: 14-16.

<sup>54</sup> Subrahmanya Sarma, Puranam. "aadhunika navalalo teluguvaari patra." *Visakha Sahiti, pratyeka sanchika*. 1977. n.p.

pen and accomplished so much. Imagine how great the novel will be when every one from all classes in our society starts writing."

### Commercial publishers

Soon enough, commercial publishers noticed the marketability of fiction by women writers. First, the companies were publishing only the novels, which had been serialized in popular magazines. Later they started publishing "direct novels", meaning first time publication. Both types of novels brought enormous name and fame to the women writers and money for the publishers. Following the magazine trends, the commercial publishers were also accommodating the demands of women writers.

D. Kameswari has an interesting story to relate about her first novel, *Kottaneeru* [Fresh waters], and how she came to write it. In 1968, Kameswari was searching for a publisher to publish an anthology of her short stories. K. Ramalakshmi introduced her to M. N. Rao, publisher of EMESCO books. At the time, EMESCO was one of the foremost publishers of popular fiction. M. N. Rao told Kameswari that anthologies were not selling well, and asked her to bring him a novel. Then Ramalakshmi advised Kameswari to write a novel to humor the publisher and include her anthology in the negotiations. Thus, Kameswari wrote her first novel. She continued to write novels and use them as bargaining chips to publish her anthologies in the next few years, she added!<sup>55</sup>

In those days, big name publishers like Navodaya Publishers, Visalandhra Publishing House, Desi Kavita Mandali and M. Seshachalam & Company (an affiliate of EMESCO) published mostly fiction by women writers. Lata published her works on her own under the banner Vamsi Publications. Ranganayakamma published her books first under the banner, M.S.R. publications, and later under Sweet Home Publications. In general, writers mostly relied on commercial publishers.

### The academy

The academy continued to be indifferent, despite the unprecedented interest the readers, the magazine editors, and publishers were showing in the fiction by women writers at this time. Women writers were conspicuous by their absence in the critical works produced by the academy in the sixties and early seventies but for an occasional reference to one or two writers like Lata and Ranganayakamma. A quick glance at the academic studies by scholars and researchers would reveal that the names of the women fiction writers appeared only sporadically.

In 2000, Potturi Venkateswara Rao devoted one chapter to female fiction writers, entitled "Exclusively for women" [*acchamga aadavaalla kosam*], in his book, *naati patrikala meti viluvalu* [the high standards of the magazines of the past]<sup>56</sup>. Poranki Dakshinamurti published his book *kathaa vanjmayam* [History of short story] in 1995, and listed more than 200 writers as eminent fiction writers between 1910 and 1975. In his book, he included thirty women writers; and out of the thirty, twenty-four were writers of the fifties and sixties. Kancanapalli Kanakamba (1893- ?) was named as the first woman writer to publish an anthology, *Chakkani kathalu* [Beautiful stories]. Among other writers mentioned were Kanuparti Varalakshamma (1896-1978), Kommuri Padmavatidevi (1909- ?), and Illindala Saraswatidevi (1915-1998).

In the last twenty-five years, there has been no significant change in the ratio of male writers to female writers in terms of women's representation in the anthologies. Even to this day, reference to women writers in critical studies is few and far in between. I must

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<sup>55</sup> *Andhra jyoti weekly*, 4 June 1984. p. 24

<sup>56</sup> Op. cit. pp. 86-91.

however admit that women writers are being accepted as subjects for masters' and Ph.D. theses. Interestingly, we find even the female scholars and critics from the academy focused only on the male writers of repute.

It took nearly three decades for the academy to accept the fiction by women writers as literature. By nineteen eighties, they began conferring honorary doctoral degrees on women writers: An honorary doctorate and a *kalaprapoorna* title were conferred on Lata, honorary doctoral degrees on Bhanumati Ramakrishna, Vasireddy Sitadevi and Malati Chendur. I do not have the complete list but possibly almost all the women writers of the sixties, had received honorary doctorates by now, which I suppose is a validation at the academic level.

My question is why the universities would confer honorary doctoral degrees on women writers while denying them a fair place in anthologies and literary discussions.

The women writers became subjects of doctoral dissertations in the eighties. Arepalli Vijayalakshmi, writer and scholar, noted, "Twenty-nine novels were written by women in the first quarter of the twentieth century. ... By nineteen sixties, the number went up significantly. ... Nearly two hundred women have produced several thousands of novels ... A peculiar phenomenon has occurred in the field of fiction by women in the post-independence era. There has been a major change [in the history of Telugu fiction]".<sup>57</sup>

An established male writer and critic, Koduri Sriramamurti, commenting on the same period, said: "Currently, women have been writing fiction like never before. The demand for fiction by women writers has increased tremendously. I think it is perfectly fair to label the present period as '*navalaa yugam*' and I mean it in both senses."<sup>58</sup> The Telugu term *navala* has two meanings—woman and fiction. The two comments, one from a female critic and the second from a male critic, both from the academy, together, sum up the present day perception of women writers in Andhra Pradesh.

To put it another way, the women writers found a strong platform for their writings in popular magazines giving rise to two powerful but contradictory arguments. On one hand, the scholars and the academy found one more reason to dismiss the women's writing as non-literature, and on the other, the publishers found it a major contributory factor for increasing their magazine circulations and sales, and, therefore became avid supporters of women's writing.

Criticism on women writers started appearing in academic works in the late seventies and the eighties. Given below are two examples of the male critics' perception of women's writing. Sriramamurti labeled Ranganayakamma as an "angry [young] woman."<sup>59</sup> Vallampati Venkatasubbaiah commented, "Study of women's issues from historical and sociological perspectives started with Ranganayakamma." He further added,

When a woman, who has been oppressed and violated for centuries, questions our dubious values, we cannot expect her defiant questions to be in polite language. We must brace ourselves to be hurt. We are not qualified to dismiss those questions as angry outbursts. On the contrary, we must ask ourselves why the voice is so loud and where those belligerent questions are coming from.<sup>60</sup>

Another noted scholar from the academy, Akkiraju Ramapati Rao [psued. Manjusri] stated as follows:

Ranganayakamma is a superb writer. She possesses sharp imagination and brisk style. Although she has vigorous imagination, fierce ingenuity, and inspirational style,

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<sup>57</sup> Vijayalakshmi. A. pp.10-11.

<sup>58</sup> *Telugu navalalo manovisleshana*, p. 234.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 237.

<sup>60</sup> Venkatasubbaiah, Vallampati. p. 137.

she could not become a writer of the same caliber as Premchand, Sarat and Tagore because of her fixated zeal of the extremist ideology and subsequent lack of understanding of the existing social structure.<sup>61</sup>

These comments, put in juxtaposition, indicate that the critics have noted Ranganayakamma's writings only within the ideological context. Implicitly she wrote like a man. In that, I have to wonder what criteria are being used for judging a writer or her work.

Among the writers, who were most unpopular in the academy, Lata stood foremost, followed by Sulochana Rani. Both Lata and Sulochana Rani were accused of presenting unrealistic dream world and misguiding the impressionable youth.

Lata faced harsh criticism for writing about the horrendous stories of the prostitutes on the streets in a revolting language and attacking the society in scathing terms. Her first novel, *gali padagalu – neeti budagalu* [Kites and Water bubbles] was published in 1951. The book was not officially banned but there was a social taboo. The elite dismissed it as a cheap attempt by a woman writer to sell her book. Questions such as how could a woman write about prostitutes and how did she come to know all the gory details in the first place became a moot point.

*For the first time in the history of Telugu fiction, author's gender became an issue.* In the past, Muddupalani was criticized for her poetry.

Similarly, Sulochana Rani met with harsh criticism as writing irresponsible fiction. The critics, including women scholars commented that her novels were misguiding the impressionable youth.

### **Female scholars' perspective in the academy**

Some of the contemporary women writers from the academy subscribed to the view that Sulochana Rani's fiction was doing more harm than good to the society. C. Anandaramam, a noted writer and Telugu professor, commented in her study of fiction of the seventies and the eighties as follows:

The readers are drenched in an illusory world filled with six-foot tall heroes, fancy foreign cars, colossal mansions surrounded by lawns and water fountains. Since this [kind of] uninterrupted happiness gets boring, they [the characters] are also depicted as suffering from a few imaginary hardships arising from misunderstandings and as spilling tears.

Because of the change that has taken place in the economic and social disposition of women in the society, [these] two decades have come to be known as an era of female fiction writers.<sup>62</sup>

The critic apparently ignored the fact that Sulochana Rani was writing romance fiction. Thus, it would be appropriate to review her fiction, based on the criteria designed for that specific genre. On the other hand, if Anandaramam meant that the romance fiction must be dismissed as commercial literature,<sup>63</sup> it could be argued that Sulochana Rani successfully measured up to the standards of commercial writing.

Ironically, one of the contentions of the feminists has been that women were not able to publish due to gender discrimination! Apparently, Sulochana Rani has succeeded in writing novels that publishers would kill for!

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<sup>61</sup> Ramapati Rao, Akkiraju. *sahiteevyasangam*, p. 83.

<sup>62</sup> Anandaramam, C. *Samaja sahityaalu*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. pp. 91-97

I am not sure if there is a demonstrable basis for this charge against Sulochana Rani. Nevertheless, I would like to quote the comment made, in a different context, by Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao, known for his critical analysis. Kutumba Rao stated that the books themselves do not make people good or bad, but only serve as an affirmation for those who are looking for an affirmation of their own actions or decisions.<sup>64</sup> I am inclined to agree with Kutumba Rao.

The point is while the academy continued to dismiss some of the writers as non-productive and their writings as "non-literature", the public embraced them with unprecedented zeal thereby giving rise to the question which one is acceptable as a genre and which is not.

Sulochana Rani did not receive validation from the academy in the sixties and probably not in the seventies. However, she remains to be one of the top-ranking writers in terms of readership and financial success.

### **Discerning readers outside the academy**

By the mid-sixties, Lata gained respect among fellow writers, both male and female. Anjaneya Sarma, a civil engineer by profession, wrote a book on Lata, *sahitilata*. In his book, he quoted excerpts from numerous letters Lata had received from male writers and ardent readers of her fiction. For instance, Buchibabu, an eminent writer known for his psychoanalytical fiction, wrote [original in English]:

There is a social consciousness in your writings. Probably Chalam, Alberto Moravia, [and] Lawrence wrote not without a reason. I feel proud without reservation that we all are probing the same truth. Maybe you had read their writings. We all are exploring the same home called social values and each of us opening a different window, and thereby making the home livable. No one writer can accomplish a literary tradition single-handedly. Several persons have to make a combined effort. Your book is supporting that effort.<sup>65</sup>

Toleti Kanakaraju, well-known physician and scholar, wrote in English:

I found you depicting 'provoking incidents' but in the latest work of yours you could really picture 'thought provoking' incidents and thoughts, which really transcended mundane measurements.

Hats off to you. I wonder whether you can produce a better work of psychological excellence than this.

My wife Srimati Toleti Seshamma garu also shares the above thoughts.<sup>66</sup>

Lata's writings had been compared to several famous writers from all over the world. Anjaneya Sarma noted:

Resemblance is seen between the characters in *Saptaswaraalu* and those in *Man and Superman* by Shaw. We see in Lata also the kind of sharp wit we find in Shaw... The views expressed by Oscar Wilde in *Dorian Gray* are evident in Lata's *Jeevana Sravanti*; a shade of the characters of Dostoyevsky in *Patha viheena*; and a semblance of Maugham's Dorian in *Saptaswaraalu*. Similarly, we can see Rahul Sankrutyayan, Annamacharyulu, and Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry in her works. Also in *gali padagalu-neeti budagalu*, we see a shade of Jean Paul Sartre. Lata has maintained her own style though.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Andhra jyoti weekly*, 29 July 1977, pp. 2-3

<sup>65</sup> Anjaneya Sarma. *Sahitilata*, p. 84.

<sup>66</sup> Op. Cit., pp. 88-89.

<sup>67</sup> Op. Cit. p. 231.

### Non-scholar readers

The difference in the perceptions of the academy and the general readers has always been significant. Unlike the academicians, the ordinary readers read stories either for diversion or to find solutions for their own problems. In the later case, they would identify themselves with the characters and become emotionally involved in the story. Telugu readers are no exception to this rule.

In the sixties, women writers have attained the status of movie stars. Readers wrote about their problems to the women writers of this period and sought their advice. I have mentioned Malati Chendur earlier. In addition, K. Vasundhara Devi, a writer and critic, recounted a real-life story illustrative of readers' trust in writers. She wrote:

A reader came to me and said that he had read three stories, and one of them is mine. In all the three stories, the protagonist suffered from tuberculosis for a while and died at the end. The reader asked me, "Do all the tuberculosis patients die?"<sup>68</sup>

The reader was a tuberculosis patient himself, and desperately hanging on to his life, wife, and a six-month-old son. For him, the stories were no consolation. The stories in effect robbed him of his faith and hope.

Vasundhara Devi continued to note that she felt miserable, apologized to him on behalf of all the writers, and said some comforting words to him, but could never really get over it. "I still see his face. I swore to myself that I would never write a story with death as a solution again."<sup>69</sup>

Vasireddy Sitadevi also mentioned that readers approached her for advice, or wrote to her that her stories had played a decisive role in their lives.<sup>70</sup>

### Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi

The state government formed Sahitya Akademi [literary organization] in the early sixties. One of the functions of Akademi was to present awards annually to the best works in several categories.

In 1976, the Akademi announced awards for works in various literary genres as usual but excluded fiction from the list of categories. Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma, editor of *Andhra jyoti*, took exception to their decision, and published a letter in his magazine condemning their action. The letter read as follows [translation mine]:

On October 31, Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi published several categories for awards but left out the fiction category. Possibly, the novels that had received the award in the past were not of inferior quality. However, the novels that are being published now are not substandard compared to the novels that had received the awards in the past.

For instance, Madireddy Sulochana has written excellent fiction depicting Telangana life. Some of the titles worth mentioning are *Tharam marindi* [new generation], *Pula manasulu* [Flower-like hearts], and *Mathamu-manishi* [Religion and Man]. So also the novels of Sulochana Rani, Andhra people's favorite writer. Her novels include *Jeevana tharangalu* [The waves of life], *Bandi* [the prisoner], and *Premalekhalu* [love letters] among others. Any one of these novels is sure to meet the criteria for an award. Several women writers such as, D. Kameswari, Parimala Someswar, and I.V.S. Atchyutavalli have written several excellent novels. Publishers have published a record

<sup>68</sup> Vasundharadevi, K. *Mahila*, pp. 49-60.

<sup>69</sup> Op. cit. 60.

<sup>70</sup> Sivasankari. 210-215.

number of three hundred new novels, which is unheard of in the history of Telugu fiction.<sup>71</sup>

Notably all the novels mentioned in the above letter are written by women writers. A few years later, I happened to speak with Subrahmanya Sarma and ask him about his views on the subject. I asked him if his comments in the letter quoted above reflected his views on the fiction by women writers. He replied that he was speaking in relative terms; that is, in terms of the quality of the novels that had received awards in the past. His response would not explain why he quoted novels by women writers only though.

I am not sure whether Sahitya Akademi had acted on this protest or not but the letter triggered a different kind of debate. The readers and the elite poured letters into *Andhra jyoti* office commenting on the fiction by women writers. Some readers wrote in support of the women writers and others seized the occasion to ridicule them. Some letters stated that the women writers were writing trash containing cheap sentiment and empty dreams while others maintained that the women writers were doing impressive service. In this heated debate, the comments made by two highly reputable male critics, Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao and Addepalli Rammohan Rao are significant. Kutumba Rao stated that the writings should not be judged based on writer's gender.<sup>72</sup> Rammohan Rao stated that the critics must give credit to the women writers for what they had accomplished thus far.<sup>73</sup>

While I was discussing these letters with Kalpana Rentala, a young feminist writer, she pointed out another article written by the same Subrahmanya Sarma published two years earlier. In his article, Subrahmanya Sarma made acerbic comments on fiction by women writers (See Kalpana's foreword). It would be appropriate here to quote another writer and critic of high esteem, Kethu Viswanatha Reddy, who commented, "Writers such as Sridevi, Saraladevi, Turaga Janakirani, Kalyanasundari Jagannath, Vasireddy Sitadevi, Acanta Saradadevi, Pavani Nirmala Prabhavati, Nidadavolu Malathi, and Ranganayakamma, have accomplished nothing in terms of technique, nothing comparable to Katherine Mansfield. What is worse, they do not even have the ease of diction [*bhashaa saralyam*]."<sup>74</sup>

These views expressed by male critics in the seventies through nineties reflect the attention Telugu women writers were getting from male writers both positive and negative.

Sahitya Akademi has been organizing Telugu women writers Conferences since 1963. I came across newspaper accounts of two conferences, one held in 1969 and the other in 1975. The two accounts illustrate the marked change in the tone and perceptions of the women writers from late sixties to mid-seventies.

The notable feature in the conference held in 1969 was most of the writers—Dronamraju Lakshmibayamma, Avula Jayapradadevi, Yellapragada Sitakumari, Illindala Saraswatidevi and Utukuri Lakshmikantamma—were not only distinguished writers but also active participants in the freedom movement, and for that reason, the nationalist spirit seemed to be the dominant theme in their speeches.

They quoted Gandhian principles and his contribution to women's movement: Recalled Gandhi's advice to stay on the course of one's duty and the rights would follow (Yellapragada Sitakumari). Gandhi was a pioneer, who put the individual ahead of the country and the society. It would take long time before we saw the kind of country he had envisioned (Utukuri Lakshmikantamma). Men like Raja Rammohan Roy, Kandukuri Veeresalingam and Gandhi had done great service to women's freedom (Illindala

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<sup>71</sup> *Andhra jyoti weekly*, 19 November 1976, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Andhra jyoti weekly*, 28 January 1977, p. 2

<sup>73</sup> *Andhra jyoti weekly*, 25 February 1977, p. 2

<sup>74</sup> Viswanatha Reddy, Kethu. *Drushti: Sahitya vyasalu*, p. 73



Saraswatidevi). We should worship Gandhi and Kasturbaa the same way we worship our gods (Dronamraju Lakshmibayamma).

On the third day, twenty-four women writers were honored at the conference.<sup>75</sup>

Regarding the conference held in 1975, Vasireddy Kasiratnam wrote a three-page review on the three-day meetings, the gist of which is as follows:<sup>76</sup>

Majority of the readers wondered whether the conference would be a success or failure. On a positive note, all the participants arrived on time to the meetings (which is almost unheard of in Indian context), and they all were well prepared with their speeches.

Since some of the speakers were actors (e.g. Bhanumati Ramakrishna), there was a question whether the audience came to see only the actors. The chairman, Bezawada Gopala Reddy, governor of Uttar Pradesh, suggested that those who had come to see the movie stars only are free to leave along with the actors. The audience however remained seated, proving that the writers commanded the same glamour as the movie stars.

The comments made by speakers reflected contemporary views on and by women writers: Some people seem to believe that women writers are lagging behind but that is unfounded (Vasireddy Sitadevi). Women writers should learn to study life critically, understand human nature and write responsibly (Vasireddy Kasiratnam). Movie producers prefer women's stories; women writers should not give critics a reason to accuse them of plagiarism (Bhanumati Ramakrishna). Nowadays we see numerous female names in the field of fiction but sixty percent of them are male writers writing under female pseudonyms; good fiction comes out of good criticism (Ramalakshmi Arudra). Current literature is reflecting the changes that had taken place in the past twenty-five years (Parimala Someswar). Today's society is filled with numerous issues, and writers should write about those issues in a constructive manner (Syamala Rani). A story has done its job if it could change just one person (Kavilipati Vijayalakshmi).

These statements show that women writers are becoming increasingly aware of social conditions around them and their role as writers in society.

The reviewer Kasiratnam also noted that a reader from the audience sent a note to the podium in the form of a poem, "Oh voyagers! Bring our women writers down to the earth," implying women writers were writing unrealistic stories. In response, Lata said, "Why don't you look up and acknowledge our presence," implying that possibly the problem is not women writers are writing unrealistic fiction but some readers are refusing to acknowledge them as writers.

On 17 January 1975, *Andhra jyoti* weekly published a special edition on women writers (in step with the United Nations' announcement of the year as the International Women's Year. It was also the Telugu festival, Sankranti, time.). The magazine included brief bios of several women writers (from which I quoted earlier) under the title, *racayitrula paricaya maalika* [introductions to the women writers featured in the current issue]. The editorial included a comment that, "... unfortunately, in our country, women are as much responsible for their trailing behind. They themselves should make the effort to free themselves from the shackles of irrational beliefs, dated customs and meaningless traditions."

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<sup>75</sup> The honorees were Illindala Saraswatidevi, Avula Jayapradadevi, Vidyavati Omprakash, Dronamraju Lakshmibayamma, Yellapragada Sitakumari, Basavaraju Rajyalakshamma, Utukuri Lakshmikantamma, Nayani Krishnakumari, Vasireddy Sitadevi, Binadevi, Nidadavolu Malathi, Vedula Minakshidevi, Polapragada Rajyalakshmi, Ramalakshmi Arudra, Sarvani, Darbha Bhaskaramma, Parimala Someswar, J. Varalakshmi, Tayaramma, Atluri Chaudhurani, Goparaju Hymavati, Surapaneni Manorama, and Maddi Ranganayakamma. *Andhra patrika*. 6 May 1969.

<sup>76</sup> *Andhra jyoti* 7 March 1975. pp. 4-6.

In the same issue, some articles by women writers discussed potent issues. Vasireddy Kasiratnam wrote an article "Is there a need for separate conferences for women?"<sup>77</sup> The author noted the changes in the mode of writing from descriptions of woman's body parts to current issues. She however failed to make a strong case for the need for separate conferences for women.

P. Satyavati wrote about the criticism on women writers. She quoted several cartoons and jokes about women writers and commented that several male writers were also writing ludicrous stories, and some of them were using female names. "In the past women were portrayed in cartoons as aggressive with rolling pins in their hands and now they are being portrayed with pens in their hands," she commented, and ended the article with an invitation to the cartoonists to portray male writers also in their cartoons. The article described what was happening in the field of criticism of women writers but did not explain the reasons underlying this situation. There was no clear analysis how or whether such cartoons impacted women's writing.

In short, it would appear that by mid-seventies women writers were becoming increasingly conscious of the social issues, unfair reviews of their writings by male establishment, and their own responsibility or eagerness to set the record straight. That is a step forward from the previous century and a step in the right direction.

### **Women writers as a target of ridicule**

Before going into further details regarding this sarcasm and ridicule, a brief note on culture is relevant here. I have commented on this aspect earlier. Additionally, I would like to relate some of the comments made at the Visakha Sahiti meeting on October 12, 2002. One of the examples, given by Malayavasini, a senior professor and writer, is a poem written to ridicule women's writing. She said,

A woman, named Koonalamma, wrote poems, with her name as caption at the end of each verse. Imitating her style, a male writer wrote the following poem:

*kundale bhaandamulu  
kukkale sunakaalu  
aaduvaare streelu  
O koonalammaa!*

In this poem, a set of words from colloquial Telugu, '*kundalu*' [clay pots], '*kukkalu*' [dogs], and '*aaduvaaru*' [women] are equated with a set of Sanskrit terms, '*bhaandammulu*,' '*sunakaalu*' and '*streelu*', implying a false sense of elevation in status. Malayavasini commented that replacing the colloquial terms with pedagogic terminology (for example, damsel for woman in English) might appear complimentary on the surface but in reality meant to ridicule the female author, Koonalamma.

A second example Malayavasini quoted was from a weekly magazine. She referred to a set of photographs of women writers published in *Andhra jyoti* in November 1982, under the caption, "*racayitrula bommalakoluvu*," [a display of dolls] and commented that the caption was hardly complimentary to the writers' creativity.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Andhra jyoti* 17 January 1975, p. 60.

<sup>78</sup> During October or November, Telugu people celebrate Dasara and part of the festivities is *bommalakoluvu*. Young girls arrange dolls and other items—they can be very creative—and invite each other to visit their decorations.

She also added that, probably, we would have more women writers, if this kind of ridicule and humiliation had not been prevalent in our society. I would have to agree with the first part but I am not sure of the second part, that is whether ridicule deterred women from writing. In the sixties and seventies, women writers did not stop writing for fear of ridicule to the best of my knowledge. I am not aware of any protest from the writers themselves to this caption *bommalakoluvu* either.

Actually several writers have used and continue to use the exchange of wisecracks, teasing and picking on each other as part of creating humorous episodes. It has been commonplace in our families for centuries. They are especially acceptable norms among family members like brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and husband and wife.

Placed in juxtaposition, these observations—Subrahmanya Sarma's protest against Sahitya Akademi's decision and his subsequent comment; and, Malayavasini's objection to the use of the caption, *bommalakoluvu* (published in the same *Andhra jyoti*, of which Subrahmanya Sarma was editor)—showcase the complex nature of personal relationships in our society in bold relief.

By late seventies, the practice of ridiculing women writers found their way into the popular magazines. The magazine pages were filled with cartoons and jokes on women writers.

I shall discuss the humor and culture in detail later. For the present, it would suffice to say that the women writers did not take the jokes and ridicule seriously. They went on writing and publishing.

There are also instances where women writers themselves made satirical comments. Bomma Hemadevi, a prolific writer in this period, made a tongue-in-cheek remark. She said, "Sometimes my husband gives me little money out of the goodness of his heart and tells me to go shopping, buy something for myself. And with that money, I buy the paper to write the stories."

It is quite normal for a woman writer to enjoy a private joke or even share it with a friend. But publishing it in a popular magazine certainly implies that she felt free enough to do so; it was intended to be a joke on the people who were complaining about lack of economic freedom.

Honestly, I believe it requires a separate study, a job for cultural anthropologists, to identify how far this practice of ridicule influenced the creativity in women. In Andhra Pradesh, support and ridicule existed side by side.

### **Use of pseudonyms**

Use of pseudonyms in the latter half of the twentieth century requires special mention. Unlike in the United States and Great Britain, Telugu women writers did not use male pseudonyms. Those who used pseudonyms picked only female names. For example, Aravinda (A.S. Mani), Syamala Rani (Akella Kamala Vijayalakshmi), Sarvani (Nilarambham Saradamma) and Bomma Hemadevi (Bomma Rukmini) are some of the pseudonyms used by female writers. Hemadevi mentioned that Hema was her daughter-in-law's name! There is however no clear explanation why they chose to use pseudonyms. There was no indication it was due to fear of ridicule. From my interviews, it was obvious they did not hide their writing activities.

There is one writer, M. Padmavati, who has been writing under the pseudonym Vacaspati, which stands for Brahma, husband of Saraswati, Goddess of learning. Since the two names, Vacaspati and Saraswati are onomatopoeic, I wonder if it was intentional.

Malayavasini said that male writers using female pseudonyms started in the forties when women's magazines proliferated, and the editors could not find enough women contributors to fill the pages. Setti Lakshminarasimham translated the *Hounds of Baskerville*, under the title, *jaagilamu*, and published it under his sister's name, Seeram Subhadramba.<sup>79</sup>

A unique phenomenon of this period is the use of female pseudonyms by male writers. In the fifties and sixties, some of the famous male writers like Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry (Kantaakanta, Jasmine)<sup>80</sup>, Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma (Puranam Sita, probably taken from his wife's name, Sita Mahalakshmi), Akkiraju Ramapati Rao (Manjusri), and Natarajan (Sarada) used female pseudonyms given in parentheses. Viswanatha Sastry mentioned in a conversation with me that he had started writing under the pseudonym in order to get the magazine editors' attention.

Discussion on pseudonyms is not complete without reference to Binadevi, a name that is still under fire. Binadevi has been writing since mid-sixties. In the past, it was believed that the actual writer was her husband, late B. Narsinga Rao, a judge by profession, and that he made up the pseudonym in order to circumvent some administrative issues. Secondly, in order to pass his wife, Balatripura Sundaramma as the original author because of the popularity of women writers.<sup>81</sup> His wife, Balatripura Sundaramma however has been writing under the same pseudonym after her husband's death. In 1999, she has received the Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry award, which seems to vouch for her position as a writer in her own right. I contacted Balatripura Sundaramma but did not receive reply.

In Andhra Pradesh, we have several couples who are also writers. In some cases, they both had been writing before they were married. Rumors of husbands writing under the names of wives have been prevalent in cases where both husbands and wives are writers but hard to substantiate. Some of the notable couples are Polapragada Satyanarayana Murthy and Rajyalakshmi, K. Ramalakshmi and Arudra, R. Vasundhara Devi and R. S. Sudarsanam. Strangely, no controversy flared up in the case of these couples as in the case of Binadevi.

One of the peculiarities of Telugu women writers, starting in the nineteen fifties, was to redefine the family values while expressing non-traditional and even controversial views. Most of the writers maintained traditional values for all appearances. They stayed home, cooked meals, took care of children, and some of them would not even leave home without their husbands by their side. Only few were willing to participate in public meetings (Nayani Krishnakumari, Utukuri Lakshmikantamma, K. Ramalakshmi, and C. Anandaramam, for instance). Some of them would not publish their photos in newspapers and magazines (Malati Chendur, Ranganayakamma, and Sulochana Rani, for example), although they enjoyed enormous recognition early in life as writers.

So far, I have presented several perspectives, conflicting at times, rather intentionally. My purpose is to illustrate the multifarious perceptions and attitudes prevalent in our culture. In the medieval period, women created their own world when they stayed home and constrained their poetry to themselves; it was a personal journey. In the early fifties, the women writers kept part of these values from the preceding centuries while reworking a few to meet their modified perceptions of the world around them.

Publishing their stories was a major breakthrough for women writers in the fifties. The second striking difference from the writers of the past was their awareness of identity, which surfaced during the freedom movement. After the British left and the democratic

<sup>79</sup> Visakha Sahiti, literary meet, on 12 October 2002.

<sup>80</sup> Viswanatha Sastry has mentioned at one of the Visakha Sahiti meetings in the early sixties that he had started publishing under a female name because of the magazines' interest in women writers.

<sup>81</sup> Ramalakshmi, K. [comp.] *Racayitrula samacara sucika*, .n. p.

principles were put in place, the individual became the nucleus. Since both men and women participated in the freedom struggle, men encouraged women. Self-awareness became a natural outcome in both the cases. Women started perceiving themselves as individuals. That was evident in the women writers of the nineteen fifties in their choice of themes and their diction.

### 3. THEMES

In the preceding chapter, we have noted how Telugu women writers moved away from bhakti tradition of self-effacement to the awareness of self (identity) following the nationalist and social reform movements. It is important to note that the original intent of the social reformers and educationists was not instilling a sense of self-awareness in women. The education for woman was intended only to make her a better housewife.

However, most of the writers of the fifties were children or young adults at the time the nationalist movement peaked and thus had grown up with the values of freedom and commitment.

Secondly, the women's education movement encouraged women to read. Majority of the women writers of this decade had formal education up to high school at least.

At the end of the forties, the last vestiges of national spirit, the reform movement, and the library movement continued to influence the writers and readers. Consequently, the women readership also augmented which in turn gave further support to women writers.

In the early fifties, the women writers started looking for themes other than bhakti and romanticism. Their themes reflected traces of the past as well as the new awareness of self, which was still in the formative stage. Because women still stayed at home while improving their reading and writing skills, and because the magazines and family members encouraged them to write, they started to write fiction. They were writing about what they were familiar with—the home and the family.

With the collapse of zamindari system and the princely states, the upper class women also became middle-class. A new set of middle-class mores emerged subsequently. The writers depicted their life—the changing values, the social norms, especially the newly emerged class of the educated women and the issues emanating from their new status as educated women, the ensuing economic problems, and most importantly, the changing face of the relationships within the family.

A few writers depicted characters from the haves and have-nots often with a romantic slant though. Depicting the poor was rare except as secondary characters, and when they did, it was from the perspective of the upper classes. The poor were often illustrated as symbolic of a perception that was relevant to the middle-class. We hardly find stories of the poor from their own perspective in women's writing in this period.

During the two and a half decades in question, about twenty to thirty women writers contributed profusely and regularly to the weekly and monthly magazines. Some sixty to seventy writers wrote occasionally. Most of them produced voluminous literature in the form of novels and anthologies. Tanneti Hemalata [Lata], Ranganayakamma, Malati Chendur, Dwivedula Visalakshi, Vasireddy Sitadevi, D. Kameswari, and Madireddy Sulochana, were some of the many writers who had successfully portrayed the multifaceted terrain of contemporary life. Writers like Kalyanasundari Jagannath, Chaganti Tulasi, Turaga Janakirani, R. Vasundhara Devi, P. Saraladevi, Acanta Saradadevi and Nidadavolu Malathi wrote fewer in quantity but distinctive in quality. All these writers had a firm grip on the middle-class problems at home and tangible issues in society—the problems young women were facing because of their higher education, and the fast-changing moral and ethical values. A few writers like Bhanumati Ramakrishna and Yeddanapudi Sulochana Rani wrote fiction in a lighter vein nonetheless captivating. Both of them found a niche of their own.

One factor that worked both for and against the women writers of this period was the volume of fiction they had produced. On one hand, it helped to escalate the circulation figures for the magazines, and the writers to attain a celebrity status. On the other, the amount of literature they were producing set off the elitists to undermine the value of women's writing. A common comment among the elite at the time was that the women writers were producing enormous amount of worthless fiction (this opinion is maintained by some critics even today), the actual word was "trash". In reality, both men and women produced stories and novels in astronomical numbers in order to meet the demands of the magazines. The women writers succeeded in writing fiction that appealed greatly to the ordinary readers nevertheless.

Coming back to the themes in this period, Telugu women became aware of their identities for the first time and started portraying the same in their stories. Additionally, they started dealing with a wide variety of social issues.

A few synopses given below reveal the breadth of women's writing during this period and facilitate further discussion on their talent in the next chapter.

In the women's fiction, their portrayal of woman's awareness of her identity varied from a simple knowledge that she was a person in her own right to protesting and then to taking charge of her life.

One story illustrating the woman's awareness, just awareness only, is "*eduru chuusina muhurtam*" [The Long Awaited Moment] by P. Saraladevi. The story illustrates woman's perception of how she was being ignored by her family members.

At the age of six, little Durga started looking around and wanting the things she was noticing—things like a frock with printed flowers her friend was wearing, red satin ribbon for her braid, and nice dolls to show to her friends and make them jealous. She just heard her mother say that little Durga would be turning six the next day.

Durga went into the kitchen and asked her mother for a frock with printed flowers. Mother said, "We'll see after your father came home." Durga tried to figure out when that would be. She kept asking questions and mother was tired of it. Exasperated, mother snapped at her. Durga did not understand mother's frustration but she had learned to keep quiet.

As she grew older and watched her friends show off their new clothes, she kept hoping that someday somebody would buy new clothes for her too and she too could show off her new clothes. That never happened, not even at the time of her sister's wedding.

She started wearing sarees. She understood that she would not get anything until and unless she asked for it but she would not ask anybody for anything. What she wanted did not happen. Not one person ever came to her and said, *here, I got this for you*. Father did not care about her wants. Durga did not care about her brother. Mother was struggling to run the household on her own.

Durga finished her education and got a job. She brought home the first month's salary. She hoped that her mother would say, "You get something for yourself." Instead, her mother told her about the household expenses. Durga understood her responsibility.

She was bringing her salary each month and handing it to her mother, and losing heart in the process. Forget somebody saying, *I got this for you*; nobody even suggested *get something for yourself*.

She hoped that, after her marriage, her husband would fulfill her dream. That did not happen either. After her children were born, and they had grown up, things were still the same, much to her dismay.

She died. Somebody asked for a new saree to cover the dead body per custom. Durga's son said, "I will bring one," and muttered to himself, "I will bring a saree for my mother," fingering the salary in his pocket.

Several stories depicted this theme—a woman's awareness of herself as a person and a vague feeling that she is entitled to wanting a few things for herself.

The story, "*eduru chuusina muhurtam*", was originally published in *Telugu swatantra* in October 1960 and recently included in an anthology entitled *vismruta katha* [An Anthology of Forgotten Stories, 1930-1980] published in 1998. To me, the anthology highlights and is an acknowledgment that some of the good stories written by our writers are not given due credit. The compilers included stories by both men and women writers.

Noticeably, the protagonist in this story Durga did not voice her awareness of her identity. In the next story, "*maadanta mabbu*" [A Fleck of Cloud] by Kalyanasundari Jagannath, we see the protagonist constantly struggling to save her marriage, which was at stake because of her husband's one weakness, his jealousy. She was aware that, between the two of them, her husband and herself, she was the one capable of saving their marriage. In that, there is an element of traditional womanhood as had been envisaged in the past several centuries. The synopsis is:

Bhagyam went to the lake to bring water. Seshayya, a childhood friend, was on his way home from the city. He saw her and stopped to tell her that her husband, Peddiraju, would be returning home from the city that evening.

She burst into a big laugh. She felt a shower of nectar in her heart. In the next moment, she shuddered. She recalled a couple of incidents from the past.

One time Peddiraju had jumped into the lake to bring a huge bunch of lotus fruits for her, and the second time, he had gone out of town and returned home. He saw a glass of milk on the ledge and flowers in her braid and jumped to the wrong conclusion. She had explained her actions and he apologized for mistaking her intention. After that, Bhagyam swore to herself that she would never give him a reason to feel jealous again.

On another occasion, they were hit by drought. The farm had failed for want of rains and Peddiraju was forced to go to the city in search of work. The move was a heartbreaker for both of them. He promised her he would bring a black saree with gold-threaded moon prints. He remembered that Bhagyam had seen such a saree on her neighbor and liked it a lot.

Brooding over the past, she returned home from the lake, and noticed that Peddiraju had come and gone. He tossed in the bundle he had brought for her through the window and left.

Bhagyam opened the bundle and saw the black saree with gold-threaded moon print. He remembered! She was disheartened; collapsed on the floor, and sat there in the dark, with her back to the window. A lightning struck, and the moonbeams bounced on the supper plates she had washed clean earlier and set for both of them.

Outside, it was pouring down.

Unlike in the preceding story, the protagonist Bhagyam in this story, "A Fleck of Cloud," speaks. She was aware of her husband's weakness and willing to take charge of the situation.



Ranganayakamma has been most vocal in her defense of woman's place in society ever since she has picked up the pen. In one of her early stories, "*aartanaadam*" [A Desperate Cry], she depicts the story of a working class woman, Kannamma, in order to illustrate the desperate conditions of women in middle-class families.

The synopsis of the story is:

Kannamma was a working class woman. After her husband had left her and her baby for another woman, she went around looking for work to make a living. She took several odd jobs, but each time, she found herself cornered. Every man she had come across assaulted her or made sexual advances towards her. Exhausted and desperate, she arrived at the doorstep of Radha, a middle-class woman. Radha listened to her sad story and took her in.

Radha had enormous faith in her husband's ethical conduct. She strongly believed that he was as good as the Lord Rama, known for his *ekapatnivratham* [Avowed monogamist].

Radha received a telegram informing that her grandma was seriously ill. Radha went to visit her and found out that grandma was not ready to die after all. She spent a few days with her brothers and sisters joyously and returned home.

At home, Kannamma told her that Radha's husband had made sexual advances on her while Radha was away. Kannamma advised her to keep an eye on her husband and left for good.

Radha confronted her husband, Satyanarayana. He first accused Kannamma of lying, then made excuses for himself and eventually apologized. He even offered to search for Kannamma and bring her back.

Radha was disillusioned. She realized that there was no such thing as honesty in any man. A desperate cry came ripping through her heart.

The story makes use of the hardships of a lower class woman to drive home a point—the lack of security for women in middle-class families.

Issues surrounding unwed mothers were also depicted in the fifties stories. Turaga Janakirani told me in 2002 about one of the stories she had written. The story, *jaganmaata* [Divine Mother] is as follows:

A woman gave birth to a son out of wedlock. The father walked away. Two of her friends decided to visit her. One of them was self-righteous, hung up on her high moral code; she was intent on chiding the mother for committing a huge, stupid blunder. The second, a kindly disposed friend, wanted to shower pity on the new mother and show her support.

They both went to visit the new mother. Much to their amazement, the mother was very happy with her newborn baby. She had no use for either the pity of one friend or the scorn of the other. The two friends found themselves at a loss for words and left.

On their way back, they realized that they both had been wrong in their assumptions about the mother's situation. Apparently, the mother did not consider herself to be in a "situation".

Janakirani told me that the story had been received very well. She then told me about an incident that followed. Malladi Subbamma is a famous feminist and social reformer. It seems her husband read the story and said to Subbamma, "Look, you organize meetings, deliver speeches, and write hundreds of articles on feminism. Janakirani has conceptualized the entire feminism in these four pages."

The next story depicts a man who was living with two women under the same roof. In the early fifties, the story "*vaallu paadina bhuupaala raagam*" [The Wake up Song They Sang], written by P. Sridevi, became a classic not only for its theme, the man-woman relationship, but also for exposing the shallowness in the middle-class lifestyles and the values they had been supposedly upholding.

A young man, Rama Rao, (Ramam) was barely sixteen when he finished high school. His father sent him to the city in search of a job. His father, several of his uncles, aunts and other relatives, had warned him to stay away from his cousin Srinivasulu. They all told him that Srinivasulu had been living an immoral life, namely, living with two women.

In the next few days, however, Ramam learned a few more things about Srinivasulu as well as his relatives in the city. Srinivasulu gave Ramam his side of the story.

Srinivasulu had lost both his parents while he was a teen. His father had left him a huge chunk of land. His uncle, mother's brother, took him under his wing, and married off his daughter Suseela to Srinivasulu. Moreover, he took Srinivasulu's property, mismanaged it, and drove him (Srinivasulu) to near bankruptcy.

Devastated, Srinivasulu sold the rest of the land and moved to the city along with his wife to start a new life. A few years passed by. They had four children.

Varalakshmi, a rich, young widow happened to meet Srinivasulu at the hospital. She proposed to move in with him and he accepted it. He told himself, "Why not? Am I not man? Why refuse a rich and beautiful woman when she is willing to walk into my life on her own accord and fully aware of my marital status?"

Srinivasulu brought Varalakshmi home. Suseela saw the benefits of it and accepted the arrangement. Srinivasulu added, "True, Suseela does complain, especially when others are around. At the same time, she has no problem enjoying Varalakshmi's wealth. And all those uncles and aunts, who continue to disparage me and my lifestyle, have no scruples; they don't hesitate to borrow money and other things from me, knowing fully well that they are taking money from the very woman they had been disparaging."

He handed over the financial management to Varalakshmi, with vengeance and enjoyed it, too.

For Rama Rao, the complexity of this entire gamut of relatives was an education in itself. He quit searching for jobs, much to the chagrin of his father, and decided to go to college. He was convinced that he needed more time to study life.

The narrator was clearly describing a given set of values defined by three individuals for themselves and in defiance of the accepted social norms. Whether this is a story of man-woman relationships or a business proposition depends on the reader's perspective.

Women writers of this period did not confine themselves to women's issues exclusively. There was a considerable amount of fiction written on topics central to family and society. The topics included women in social context, middle-class values, human suffering and emotions.

One of the topics is woman writer as a protagonist. I met Bhanumati Ramakrishna in the early eighties. She told me a story she was writing for a movie at the time. The story was about a woman writer living in a housing complex with four other families. Each time, the writer noticed a problem in one of the other households she would write a story

suggesting a solution to their problem. This idea—a writer finding a solution for a problem in another family—has its own value in the context of the women writers' popularity during this period.

In the fifties and sixties, the women writers attained the status of movies stars, and enjoyed huge circles of fans. This may not sound strange today but it was a novel experience in the fifties especially in Indian context. This is particularly significant when put in juxtaposition with the women writers in the previous centuries. The story, "*The Image in her Mind*" by Malathi Nidadavolu illustrates readers' perception of the Telugu women writers. The gist of it is:

A young girl, captivated by the stories of a famous woman writer, learns that the writer will be coming to town and she would like to attend the meeting. She asks her brother to accompany her since her parents will not allow her to go out alone in the evening. The brother agrees. At the meeting, the girl is disappointed with the writer's speech. There is almost no correlation between what she could write and what she could deliver on the stage.

The brother teases her and comments that in all possibility the writer's husband or brother might be writing the stories and publishing under her name only because the female names are popular.

Her uncle convinces her that not all good writers are good speakers. And one should never judge a person by her appearance.

"*Pagadaalu*" [Corals], by Acanta Saradadevi, illustrates the shallowness in middle-class values.

A little girl, wearing a chain of corals, went to play with a poor child, who was living with her grandfather down the street. A little later, the girl returned home. The coral chain in her neck was missing. Her mother assumed automatically that the old man had stolen her daughter's chain. She confronted him. He desperately tried to tell her that he had never seen the chain, and known nothing about it.

The mother was convinced that he was lying and insisted that he should either return the chain or pay for it. Since he did not have the chain, the old man ended up paying for the chain with his life's savings.

After a couple of days, the coral chain was found lying under a cabinet in their own home. The little girl was happy to find the chain. She expected her mother to admit her mistake and return the money she had taken from the old man. She asked her mother jubilantly, "Shall I go and tell the old man that we've found the chain?"

Her mother's response was, "*Chi*, isn't that embarrassing! What would the neighbors think of us? Wouldn't they say that we had the corals in our home all along and knew about it too! They would say we had blamed him without basis and caused him lot of pain for no reason."

The story was narrated by the protagonist, in flashback, reminiscing after she had grown up, got married and had a child of her own. Presumably, it had taken all that time for her to understand her mother's logic. The message is, I believe, that such a false sense of middle-class values is acquired only in later years but not during childhood.

Hunger is a universal problem. The story, "*idi katha kaadu*" [This Is Not Fiction] by D. Kameswari, illustrates not only the pain of hunger but also the attitude of the elite towards the poor. The author mentioned that the idea was taken from a real incident she had witnessed. That explains the title, "This is not Fiction". It was narrated in first person, which made it that much personal.

The narrator, a woman from a well-to-do family, and her neighbors, watched a poor woman rough up her nine-year-old daughter. For all appearances, the mother's actions were cruel and heartless. The women understood that the mother would not give food to the little girl unless the little girl had picked enough sticks, sold them and brought the money to buy groceries. For them, that was horrendous, the mother's action was beyond their comprehension. How could any mother be so cruel?

As days passed by, the narrator came to know a few more things about this mother and daughter. The woman's husband had left her with their three kids for another woman. She had to find ways to feed them all by herself. The daughter, being just a kid, wanted to buy snacks with the income from her bundle of sticks. The mother wanted the money for food for the entire family.

One day the daughter, craving for snacks, gathered more sticks than she could carry. The weight of the big bundle on her head combined with the deadly heat, hunger and lack of nourishment, caused her to collapse and die. The mother was heartbroken.

The area women had no sympathy for the mother. She deserved it for all they cared.

A few days passed by. One day, the narrator was waiting for her son to come home from school. They were in the habit of eating lunch together after he returned from school. On that particular day however, the son did not come home at the scheduled hour. The mother waited for over an hour and a half.

While waiting for her son, she was beset with several thoughts and emotions—fear, frustration and hunger on one hand, and her rationale to go ahead and have her meal, on the other. Finally, she convinced herself that there was nothing wrong in going ahead and having her lunch; she was sure her son was fine; he had a big breakfast in the morning, would have had midday snacks at school. She convinced herself that he was not starving.

After she had finished eating however, she came to realize the anomaly in her own mode of thinking. "I could not wait for my son past one hour and a half. Is it not ridiculous for me to lecture on subjects like maternal instinct and mother-child relationship?" the narrator reflected.

The story, "*bhayam*", [Fear of Death] by Tangirala Meera Subrahmanyam throws light on the kind of irrational fears we entertain regarding death. It illustrates the unfounded fear of death people experience. It is not a philosophical catechism on death. The author depicts the fear or anxiety that the sight of a dead body can bring about in people. Fearing one's own death is understandable. But what is the rationale for fearing the sight of a dead body? The comment of the beggar's wife that, "the idiot is worth more after his death than when he was alive" is a powerful statement on the frailties of human nature.

Very often, the people from lower strata of society are portrayed as victims. There are a few stories however, which attempt to portray how the working class people feel about themselves and the pride they take in their work. The story, "*cirucakram*" [Small Wheel] by Nidadavolu Malathi, attempts to illustrate the way a school peon conducts himself in performing his duties and the pleasure he takes in doing so.

Venkanna left his small village with his wife Simmachalam to find a job that is supposed to improve his lifestyle. He took a job as peon in a high school in a small township. His wife was not excited about this move. She would rather stay in their village and be happy with farming the little strip of land they had.

During the annual inspection of the school by the district educational officer [*deeyivo saar*], the headmaster was a nervous wreck. He was worried that something

might go wrong and that could result in loss of funding for the school. He was taking out all his frustration on the peon. Venkanna took all the heat and rose to the occasion each time with extraordinary mettle. He even felt sorry for the headmaster.

Venkanna planted some flowerbeds around the school building, although it was not in his job description. He picked the flowers and gave them to the district educational officer's wife. She said "lovely"; that was a huge treat for Venkanna. He was ecstatic.

The district educational officer lit up his cigarette, threw the burning matchstick carelessly and caused to burn a hole in the tablecloth. Headmaster was upset since the tablecloth belonged to him. He blamed Venkanna for no reason. The officer suggested imposing a five-rupee fine on the peon. Venkanna did not protest.

After all the hullabaloo was over, Venkanna went home and sat down to enjoy the meal his wife served—rice broth and a piece of pickle—his first meal in two days. He ate the meal while narrating the day's events with great zest to his wife. The only part he did not tell her was the fine.

Venkanna took pride in the fact that he had done his duty to his satisfaction. He would have no problem sleeping that night.

The story was narrated from the perspective of Venkanna, although not in first person. The narrator seemed to imply that one's social status had no relevance for a person to feel good about himself and his job.

By nature, children are quick to adapt to a code of justice instilled by adults. The strange part is the same adults could change the tune and play to a different drum when it worked against their own interests. The story, "*baamma ruupaayi*" [Grandma's Rupee] by Chaganti Tulasi, depicts this psychology of adults and children about fairness in life.

One day, mother, father and grandmother went out leaving their two daughters and young son at home.

A poor woman and her grandson, Rama Rao, showed up at the door, unaware that the adults were not home. The poor woman told the children that she had met their grandma at the temple and felt friendly enough to visit them. She came to borrow a little cash to buy school supplies for her grandson.

The little brother and Rama Rao attended the same school. Therefore, he took the initiative and said, "*Chinnakka!* Remember, father gave a rupee to *baamma*."

"Yes, good thing you remembered. She put the money in her book, *Bhagavatam*," younger sister replied.

"You'd better not touch that money. Baamma can break both your heads," the older sister warned them.

"She'll never break my head. Who do you think I am? Don't you know I am given grandfather's name? That makes me her husband, so to speak. Nothing to worry," little brother said.

"You should not talk like that, boy," the poor woman said.

"That's what my grandmother says, ma'am," little brother replied politely.

He was determined to help them. He went in and returned with one rupee and a pair of his old half-pants. The two sisters tried to dissuade him, fearing that their parents and baamma might get mad at them for allowing him to donate the pants and the money.

The poor woman agreed with the two sisters and told the little brother that he must not give away things without his parents' permission. The little brother would not listen. He insisted that Rama Rao should accept them. The poor woman refused. The little brother took Rama Rao to a side and forced him to accept them.

Later, their grandmother and parents returned home and learned about the incident. The grandmother was furious. She yelled at all the three children.

A few minutes later, the poor woman came back with Rama Rao to return the stuff he had accepted earlier without her knowledge. She apologized for her grandson's indiscretion.

Baamma was surprised at the unexpected turn of events, changed her position, and insisted that the poor woman should keep the pants and the money.

"You were so upset with me for doing the same thing. Why didn't you take your money back," the little brother challenged grandmother.

This story was acclaimed as one of the best stories in Telugu for the touching dialogues and character portrayal, especially of the children. A well-known scholar, Ronanki Appalaswamy, stated in his preface to the book that this story ranks in the top quality stories for its psychological insights.

Stories of reflective nature make up only a small percentage of women's fiction. While some writers wrote only one or two, two writers, Acanta Saradadevi and R. Vasundhara Devi chose poignant subjects for their stories categorically.

Vasundhara Devi's long story, "*penjeekatikavvala*" [Beyond the Dense Darkness] received critical acclaim for its profound discourse on life and death. The story opens with a brief description of a locality in the city, where the haves and have-nots lived side by side. For all the wealth and the amenities Jayalakshmi, the protagonist, possessed, she was also suffering from an inexplicable discontent and frustration with her life.

She did not have the mental stability to explain any of her actions. She was haunted perpetually by confounding questions: *Why things happen the way they do? What is meaning of life? What happens after death?*

Her husband was exactly the opposite of her in his deportment. He would cherish the same human values at work and home. They had two daughters, Radhika, a smart sixteen-year-old, and Chandrika, a six-year-old retarded child.

One day, Jayalakshmi went to the circus with her teenage daughter, Radhika. Even there, she could not stop worrying. She was worried about the little girl who was performing gymnastics on a stack of bottles risking her life.

Jayalakshmi returned home and found little Chandrika playing with a sick dog. For no obvious reason, she was upset and took it on the little girl. Her husband came to the child's rescue and stopped the mother. A host of philosophical questions beset Jayalakshmi once again.

A series of incidents followed. Her husband's uncle was admitted in the hospital, and Jayalakshmi went to see him. She watched the cancer patients there and started reflecting on their mental state. That set her off again on the countless questions about the meaning of life. Each time something happened, she was pushed towards her internal struggles, into the innermost corners of her heart searching for answers about the meaning of life, and her role as a mother and a human being.

The more she pondered the more she was convinced that her life was bizarre and hideous. She could not help wondering, "How can I move on when I do not have the

strength to put my trust in anything? How can I feel safe and secure amidst this cavernous darkness?"

At the same time, she also seemed to spot a glimpse of light far beyond the dense darkness. Not even the burial ground behind her house was revolting to her any more.

A peddler came to the door with his portable slide show. As he started flipping the slides and singing the story of each slide, Jayalakshmi continued to wonder at a philosophical level what the show meant to her.

After the show had ended and the peddler left, things became clear to her. She concluded that all these things—the people, the sun, the trees and the birds—they all would continue to exist, whether she lived or died.

The story is a philosophical treatise. The author described the mental state of a woman confronted with serious questions about life and death.

Among the stories by Acanta Saradadevi, "*paaripoyina chilaka*" [The Escaped Parrot] and "*okanaati atithi*" [Guest for One Day] received critical acclaim. The story "The Escaped Parrot" was about freedom from attachments.

Kamakshamma and her husband Sundara Rao were living in a big house on the outskirts of the town. One day she found an injured parrot. She picked it up, nursed it, and kept it in a cage. The parrot became her whole world.

A few days passed by. While cleaning the room, she opened the window and forgot to close it. The parrot flew away. Kamakshamma's heart was broken. She tried to find comfort in the thought, "Six months back there was no bird. Nobody knows why it came here at the time, and why it went away now, or even where it went. There is no way of knowing." Kamakshamma stared at the empty cage and went into a fit of sobs. The gardener put away the cage.

Sundara Rao thought his wife was crazy to worry about the bird as he rushed out to catch his train. He was not aware, not even in the slightest, that there had been another life in that house. Kamakshamma sat there staring into the emptiness for a long time. "Nobody understood the bond she had developed with the parrot, what she had gained and lost in the process."

After several days, spring arrived and the trees sprouted again. With the arrival of spring, birds came chirping noisily into the garden. The gardener noticed the glow in Kamakshamma's face as she watched the birds. He said, "Madam, you see the mango sprouts and the parrots? If we hang the cage in the garden for a day, we might catch a bird."

Kamakshamma shuddered and said, "No, no. Don't do that. See how happy they are to be free. Let them live like that. Let them come and go as they please. That makes me happy. ... Why capture one bird, put it forcibly in a cage, and invite trouble for ourselves in the process. Unnecessary bonding."

The gardener did not understand her words.  
The birds in the garden chirped merrily.

The story is a comment on the freedom that is available to nonhumans. The reference to the "bonding" as unnecessary may imply that it is peculiar to humans only.

In the second story, *okkanaati atithi* [Guest for one Day], Saradadevi once again focuses on the emptiness every person feels in the innermost corners of his or her heart.

A young woman, Ketaki, was living with her father in a hut on the outskirts of the town. It was built by kind-hearted man for passersby to rest. The place was mostly

lonely but for an occasional passerby. Into that loneliness, one young man came and filled the empty space in Ketaki's heart. He was handsome and spoke very little yet stole her heart.

In the night, he saw Ketaki. "Come here, sit next to me. Let us talk," he said but there were no words. Neither of them had anything to say. He saw the *pogada* flowers lying around, made a garland, and gave it to her. The next morning he left. She asked him if he would stop by again, on his way back. He said he was a wanderer, would never go to the same place twice.

After a while, Ketaki was married. Her mother gave her a bunch of *pogada* flowers knowing she was fond of them.

Ketaki's husband kept boasting of his reputation and status in his village. As they were ready to leave, Ketaki threw away the bunch of flowers her mother had given her. Her husband asked her why.

"Too heavy," she replied.

To me, both the stories together seem to emphasize the Hindu philosophy that each person enters this world as a lone soul and departs as a lone soul. In between, he or she yearns for a soul mate but rarely finds one. Even when one finds solace in another human being, it will be short-lived.

The next story is from a writer not specifically known for her philosophical musings but I thought it made a powerful comment on our beliefs and for that reason worthy of inclusion here. Vasireddy Sitadevi is known for her understanding of farming communities, which I will be introducing a little later. This particular story, "*tamaso maa jyotirgamaya*" [Lead Me from Darkness to Light], stands out for its theme. I find this story one of the best-written stories in the sixties.

The gist of it is:

Gopalam, a young man, desperately searching for a job, develops a cynical attitude towards life and God. Avadhani, an astrologer and scholar, believes in the Almighty God, and that life follows a pre-ordained course. They often argue about it seriously.

One day, they both went to watch a circus show, where a little boy was preparing to drench himself in kerosene, set himself on fire, and jump into a deep pit.

Both Avadhani and Gopalam had learned that the boy's father and grandfather had died while performing the same feat. They feared for the young boy's life and tried to dissuade him. The boy insisted that the feat had been a family tradition for many years and he was sure he could pull it off. Besides, he needed the money. Moreover, the circus manager would not be happy if he backed out now.

Avadhani and Gopalam sat there hoping against hope. Avadhani was hoping and praying that some divine power would intervene and save the boy. Gopalam was hoping that things would not go wrong for some inexplicable reason.

However, much to their dismay, the boy was engulfed by the flames and died.

Both Gopalam and Avadhani were shaken out of their wits by this mishap. They fled the scene feeling a horrific rage at the turn of events.

The event changed their philosophy of life forever.

The story, with an upanishadic aphorism for its title, is skillfully crafted. It is a well-written story in that the author does not take sides; does not attempt to convince the reader to either trust or distrust god but presents the two sides objectively.



Majority of the stories however were written about ordinary people and incidents and in a lighter vein. For instance, K. Ramalakshmi, one of the well-known writers of our time, started publishing her stories in *Telugu swatantra* in the early fifties. I vaguely remember a series of stories she had spun around a couple, Parvati and Krishnamurti. The stories were about small, meaningless arguments the couples would engage in, mixed with a little teasing, a little pouting and happy ending.

Some of the stories written in a lighter vein became a significant part of the history of Telugu fiction. Bhanumati Ramakrishna was the first woman writer to earn the name as a female humor writer in Telugu fiction with her immortal character, *atta garu* [mother-in-law]. She wrote about thirty stories with *atta garu* as the main character and earned a permanent place in the history of modern fiction.

Each one of these stories is woven around a naive mother-in-law, who meddles constantly in the matters of her family or that of others around her, gets herself into a sticky situation and then leaves it to the daughter-in-law to sort it out. The stories are hilarious. The readers just loved them then and they do even today.

Bhanumati had written a few serious stories and published them in two anthologies, *jeevitamlo agaathaalu* [The Dark Corners of Life] and *Bhanumati Kathanikalu* [Stories by Bhanumati].

"*Patita*" [Fallen Woman] is about a woman falsely accused of an illicit affair and in the process had her life ruined by a superannuated village accountant. In "*Jeevitamlo agaathaalu*" [The Dark Corners of Life], we find the author's psychological insights into a character that laughs too much. Readers do not see the dark side of his life until the narrator explains his wife's condition; she is suffering from a kind of neurological attacks. The story ends with a comment that "probably people, who laugh too much do so in order to hide their pain in the deepest corners of their hearts".

From her mother-in-law stories, here is one story "*Kamakshi katha*" [Story of Kamakshi]:

A family was looking for a household help. The milkman introduced Kamakshi to them. Kamakshi was very attractive. The male employees (the cook, the gardener, and the errand boy) were hanging around, craving for her attention. Kamakshi told them that her husband was abusive and she was scared for her life. As always, *atta garu* offered to save her. Soon enough she learned that Kamakshi's husband always carried a knife and would not hesitate to use it if anybody meddled with him or made a move on his wife! At the mention of the word 'knife', *atta garu* stepped back. The other household staff became alert.

Matters precipitated after Kamakshi revealed that her husband had contracted possibly a contagious disease but was refusing to seek treatment. He would go to the doctor only if Kamakshi gave him 200 rupees. Kamakshi told *atta garu* and the co-workers that she had no money to help her husband. *Atta garu* and co-workers gave her the money. Kamakshi left with the money and disappeared.

*Atta garu* asked the milkman and learned that Kamakshi and her husband had been known to be con artists, and that they had been swindling people for a while. He added that he had his suspicions that even their marriage was a sham, for all he knew.

The story ended with *atta garu* "looking for another maid, an older woman and with no attachments!"

From the few summaries given above, it is possible to identify the range of topics the women writers depicted in their writings. The novels presented a bigger picture of the social conditions as perceived by the women writers of this period. In the next few pages, I will

present synopses for a few novels illustrating the breadth of their perceptions. The novels also, like short stories, cover several issues surrounding the educated women, the economic problems faced by middle-class families, and familial relationships.

One of the early novels by Malati Chendur, *Champakam - cheda purugulu* [Champakam flower and the Parasites] addresses the new problems that surfaced as a result of women's education and their earning power. Here is a synopsis of the novel:

In a family of four children, Champakam was the second of three daughters, Indu, Champakam, and Radha, and one son, Satyam. Their father died leaving the family responsibility to Satyam. Satyam was pursuing an acting career but without success. The family was not excited about his choice, but did not discourage him either.

Champakam grew up as a quiet and unassuming girl in her childhood, never expressed her views concerning what she wanted in life.

At school, one day a rich connoisseur of fine arts, Lalji, came to her music class. The teacher called on all the other children to sing but not Champakam. "Anytime someone comes to our school, I am not one of those asked to sing," Champakam told herself. At the end, however she was asked to sing.

Later Lalji went to her home and offered to take her with him to Calcutta and help her to become whatever she wanted to be. "Sometimes you see someone, feel the urge to help her. Hard to explain why but you want to save her from the injustice meted out to her," Lalji told Satyam. He tried to convince Satyam, "Poverty is not your fault. Champakam needs proper environment to grow—good food, good clothes and an inviting atmosphere. There are many things in this world that can destroy a beautiful object—poverty, greed, stupidity, selfishness, and lack of self-esteem. All these things can work as her enemies. You and your mother probably do love her. Nevertheless, it is natural for parasites to feed on a flower like champakam. I enjoy creating new opportunities for children like her. Her eyes touched my heart. They are sad like the blue clouds".

Satyam discussed Lalji's offer with his mother without giving her complete details. They decided not to tell Champakam about it. "The Goddess of fortune came and knocked on her door. Champakam did not hear it. A sort of despair and worry shut down her heart. The opportunity slipped away silently," the narrator comments.

Champakam managed to get her high school diploma and a small job in a magazine office. Eventually, she started writing and publishing her stories first in the same magazine and later in other magazines. She made a name for herself.

Satyam continued to be the head of the family with no income of his own. He got used to leaning heavily on Champakam for financial support. The family started treating Champakam potentially as an earning member, without giving the respect she deserved for the same.

Mother favored Satyam because he was son and Indu because she was meek. Indu was not doing well in school. The mother's excessive attention turned her first into a moron and later into a deranged woman. The youngest daughter Radha was a woman with independent spirit and self-will. She was aware of the inner workings of the family but chose to keep her distance.

As the years passed by, Champakam became famous and started making good money from her writings. Mother wanted Satyam to study law but he would not let go of his dream of acting. In effect, he became neither. He got used to living on Champakam's earnings. He had his mother's full support in this regard.

Champakam's self-esteem had improved after she became a successful writer. She started paying attention to her looks. Started using facial cream and make up. "Even without eye make up, Champakam's eyes are beautiful. Those eyes carry a candid smile, sad though. They are hiding the mischief of the first Champakam from her childhood days, the sadness of the second, and the insubordination of the third Champakam".

Satyam met a woman of his dreams, Kamala, while pursuing his acting career, and decided to marry her. They were engaged but Kamala's father objected to the marriage. He told Satyam to get a steady job first. Three years passed by.

Champakam met Raja Rao, a young man from a wealthy family, and they decided to get married. Kamala was not happy about it. In a fit of jealousy, she used gullible Indu to add a chemical to Champakam's facial cream. Champakam sustained burns and was scarred for life. She canceled her wedding with Raja Rao.

Raja Rao was disheartened and joined the air force.

Satyam eventually married Kamala. Radha decided to marry Venkat Rao, a local grocery store owner. Mother was not happy with her decision but could not stop the wedding. Radha and Venkat Rao were married.

All the family members got used to borrowing money from Champakam. She began feeling that their familial bonding was a charade, and that they all were coming to her only for her money. That became obvious to her in the way they all used the pronoun "we". Satyam meant his wife, his kid and himself when he said "we". Her mother would say "we" to mean Satyam, Indu and herself (mother). Champakam was never part of that equation.

Champakam began feeling like an outcaste in her own home. They had no family values; she had no place in their hearts. Probably they assumed that she had no problems and no feelings. She even began to wonder, "Am I making money like a machine only for their sake?" Such thoughts were chewing her up. Sometimes she would confront her brother or brother-in-law when they approached her for money. She would even snap at them but never stopped giving them money. It was getting monotonous.

Venkat Rao enlisted in the army. He had two children. Indu was admitted in a mental hospital in Vizag. Mother accompanied her to take care of her. Champakam was paying for their expenses.

At work, her boss died. His wife Santadevi assumed the administrative duties. Santadevi was kind to Champakam. She was the only friend Champakam could count on.

Kamala died of pneumonia. Radha died leaving behind Venkat Rao, who continued to prey upon Champakam.

One day, Champakam received a parcel from the air force headquarters. The parcel contained Raja Rao's belongings and his journal. Champakam found her photo in his journal and an entry. It read, "Souls are more important than bodies. I shall tell Champakam if I see her again." Champakam went on brooding over those two lines and cried for several nights.

Indu died at the mental hospital.

Champakam was sick and admitted in a nursing home. While she was in the nursing home, the goddess of fortune knocked on her door for a second time. The wealthy Lalji, who had met her in her childhood, remembered her prior to his death. He

left a few shares from his assets in his will for her, which would bring in six thousand rupees a year for Champakam.

After Lalji's death, his lawyer brought the news and a letter from Lalji to Champakam. For the first time, Champakam discovered that there was more to Lalji's will than she had known. She questioned her mother and learned that her mother and brother had colluded to ruin her chances for a better life. Just to spite the mother, Champakam told her that she would not accept the money from Lalji. She had lost both, Raja Rao's love and Lalji's generosity.

Champakam committed suicide leaving a note. The note said, "My life of thirty-five years is a stream of sadness. All the stories I had written were only a way to make money. My own blood relatives preyed upon me like a flock of crows. But, there is a lot of love and kindness in the world."

This is one of Malati Chendur's best works in her early literary career. She has written a few other short stories and novels on this topic—the problems of educated women in middle-class families.

Another famous writer of this era is Dwivedula Visalakshi who wrote about the problems the educated women were facing during this period.

In this period, arranged marriages acquired a new dimension because of the women's education in middle-class families. The educated women would not accept the arranged marriage with the same docility as their counterparts from the previous generations. Now they wanted their preferences to be considered as well. Some of them would refuse to marry the men who demanded dowry.

On the men's side, their choices also were correlated to woman's education. On one hand, an educated bride meant a second income. On the other, it was also a cause for concern. The fear that an educated bride might not be as docile and submissive as an uneducated woman had become an issue for the groom's family.

Visalakshi portrayed this complexity effectively in her novel, *Marina Viluvalu* [Transformed Values]. Unlike in *Champakam flower and the Parasites*, Visalakshi presents a middle-class family from a different perspective in this novel. We see an additional dimension of family values and relationships.

The synopsis of it is:

Janaki was the eldest daughter in a family of five children—two daughters, Janaki and Santha, and three sons, Surya Rao, Prakasam, and Sambu. Surya Rao was married to Kanakam. They all were living under one roof.

The second daughter Santha announced that she passed the high school exam. Mother was disappointed that the last son Sambu failed the same exam. In her mind, education was important for men but not for women. Kanakam, sister-in-law, expressed genuine pleasure at Santha's accomplishment and wished her well.

Janaki reminisces her disrupted wedding. That happened several years ago.

Janaki's marriage ceremony had ended abruptly because her father had not been able to meet the additional demands by bridegroom's father. The groom's father dragged the groom away from the wedding arena, leaving Janaki behind. By this time Janaki had been married technically, since "tying the *tali* around her neck by the groom" was completed.

Janaki went to the railway station alone at night, and tried to persuade the bridegroom to think for himself independently. The young man scorned her pleas and

turned her down. Thus, her marital bliss had ended even before it started. Their father died of broken heart, and Surya Rao being the eldest son shouldered the family responsibility.

Prakasam was not doing well in school but had the initiative and the drive to go into business. He started newspaper sales business with the blessings of Janaki and Kanakam. Surya Rao considered it demeaning and inappropriate for their social status. He was upset. Prakasam ignored the eldest brother's displeasure, and carried on his business venture.

Janaki accepted a job at a children's home.

Santha was growing up and paying more attention to her youthful fantasies than to education. The youngest son Sambu lacked self-confidence. Surya Rao kept pushing him. Sambu failed the exam again. Janaki tried to help him to gain confidence in himself but without success. Sambu committed suicide.

Prakasam was doing very well in his business. He opened a bookstore.

At the children's home, Anasuyamma, the founder, was treating Janaki kindly. Her cousin, Govinda babu, came to town for a brief visit. He and Janaki became friends. They both shared the same views about running the children's home.

Santha ran away with a young man and returned home after learning she had been cheated. Surya Rao refused to let her in fearing public scandal. Janaki moved out with Santha. Anasuyamma welcomed them both wholeheartedly.

Santha got closer to Govinda babu. They decided to get married.

After several years, Janaki's husband appeared at her door and asked her to come back to him. During the years gone by, he had married for a second time, had fathered three children, and now the second wife was dead. Therefore, he wanted Janaki to come back to him to take care of him and his children. He sounded as if he was doing *her* a favor. Janaki rejected his proposal. She would rather stay at the children's home and take care of those children.

The two novels, *Champakam and the Parasites* and *The Transformed Values* illustrate the educated woman's struggle at home.

The next novel, *Kalateeta vyaktulu* [People Ahead of Their Time] by P. Sridevi, portrays the educated woman's struggle in the outside world. It is a story of two young women and two young men and their aspirations for a better life. A fifth character is introduced towards the end. They all are educated, have no families of any significance, and, each one of them is looking forward to do something with his or her life.

Here is a synopsis of the novel:

Prakasam was a medical student. His father died. His maternal uncle was taking care of his mother and his property back in their village. Prakasam was suspicious of his uncle and his sleazy dealings but did not have the courage to confront him.

Krishnamurti was doing his final year B.A. for a second time. He had plenty of money, and for all appearances, no intention of finishing school.

Indira and her father moved into an apartment in the same building Prakasam was renting. She was working as a clerk in some office and supporting her father who was idling away his time between drinking and gambling.

Kalyani's father tried to arrange her marriage but could not do so for financial reasons. He was in no position to pay the hefty dowry the bridegrooms were

demanding. Therefore, he sold his land, put her through high school and sent her to a college in the city.

Indira invited Kalyani to rent an apartment in her building.

Indira was assertive and playing Prakasam. Prakasam was meek. He felt pulled in two directions—his obligation to his uncle on one side and his interest in Indira on the other.

Kalyani fell ill and Prakasam took care of her. He told her about his shaky financial situation. They became closer.

Krishnamurti took Indira to the beach and gave her a present for her birthday. Prakasam was jealous of Krishnamurti. He promised Indira to take her out.

Prakasam was constantly worried about his own inadequacies. He sought Kalyani's advice to buy a gift for Indira. On the way to the store, Indira suggested going to a movie. Prakasam once again felt guilty and bought a poetry book for Kalyani. Kalyani was genuinely happy for the gift and told him so. Prakasam was flattered. "He put one arm around her shoulder, and took her hand into the other, and told her, 'Today, I see you for who you really are.' Kalyani did not try to pull her hand away from his".

Kalyani learned that her father was sick and went to see him. He died, putting an end to all her ties with the village once for all. Kalyani completed the death ritual for her father and returned to the city.

On the train, she met an old friend, Vasundhara, and learned that Indira was spreading rumors about her. Kalyani understood that she could not count on Prakasam. She accepted Vasundhara's offer to move in with her.

Kalyani went to her old room to pick up her belongings. She ran into Prakasam and Indira there. Unlike in the past, neither of them showed any concern for her. Indira said, "Ever since Kalyani moved to this building, she had nothing but troubles. First, she fell sick within the first six months. Now she has lost everything". The word *everything* hit Kalyani hard.

Prakasam was perplexed by Indira's indifference to Kalyani's loss of her father. Prakasam and Indira made love.

Indira defaulted on rent. Krishnamurti helped her out. He and Indira started to go out frequently. Prakasam had mixed feelings about them.

Indira offered Kalyani's room to Krishnamurti to rent. Her apathy towards Kalyani surprised him too. She wrote an anonymous letter to Prakasam's uncle stating that Prakasam was hanging out with girls and neglecting his studies. His uncle came to the city and reprimanded him.

Indira told Krishnamurti more lies about Kalyani and Prakasam. Krishnamurti was intrigued by her character. He could not figure out, "Is Indira a good person or a bad person? Why is she teasing everybody like this? Why can't she find a way to be happy without harassing others? Why does Kalyani have to suffer? Why does she have to make all the sacrifices and lose everything? Apparently she is accursed, but why?"

Indira tried to convince Prakasam to rebel against his uncle and take charge of his land and his life. Prakasam went to his village but could not confront his uncle. He returned the same old person, much to the dismay of Indira.

Indira was disgusted with him and told him, "Your mother cannot leave your uncle. You cannot leave your mother. Go to hell, all the three of you jump into the river". She further told him, "I've been watching you. You have always been a coward. At first, I

hoped that you would build muscle after a little massage. I even thought, after some experience, you could become a man. I provided that too. What is the point? You are born one-half of a child. Your personality is cracked from the start. I've tried but I cannot fix you. I just cannot. No woman can ever trust you and survive". She broke up with him.

Krishnamurti went to Kalyani's house. A gentleman from her village came to hand over the proceeds from the sale of her house. The man became sick. Kalyani and Krishnamurti took him to the hospital where he died.

The attending physician, Chakravarti, befriended Kalyani. After her father's death, Krishnamurti, Chakravarti and Vasundhara offered to help her but Kalyani refused to accept their help. On her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, she decided to move out, start a new life and make it on her own.

Indira explained her life and philosophy to Krishnamurti. Krishnamurti was scared of Indira's hold on him but his desire for her prevailed. Indira and Krishnamurti decided to get married in Tirupati.

Chakravarti and Kalyani decided to travel by car to attend the wedding. They were involved in an accident. Finally, they arrived at the destination. Krishnamurti married Indira.

The story was about a new direction the younger generation was looking for in the sixties. Strangely, things have not changed much in the last forty years. The problems remain the same even today. Plausible solutions are yet to come.

Rural life has been a big part of Telugu fiction by both male and female writers. One of the acclaimed novels of this period is *matti manishi* [Son of the Soil] by Vasireddy Sitadevi. The novel depicts the collapse of zamindari (land ownership) families due to political reorganization and the lure of urbanization.

Here is a synopsis of the novel:

The protagonist, Sambayya, started out as a farmhand, while raising his son, Venkatapati, alone. Sambayya's father came to the village from another village and being an outsider, never commanded respect. Therefore, for Sambayya, rising to the status of a landowner became an obsession. In an attempt to elevate his status, he arranged his son's marriage with a local landowner's daughter, Varudhini.

Varudhini insisted on moving to the city and Venkatapati went along with her decision. In the city, Varudhini was carried away by its glitter and the movie industry. She went overboard. She had no qualms about sleeping with other men to accomplish her goal.

Venkatapati got used to drinking and was lost in his own world. At the center of this dreary scene, the one redeeming feature was their son, Ravi.

By now, Varudhini was seriously involved with Ramanatha babu, an influential man in the movie industry. With his help, she sent her son to an expensive school in Hyderabad.

Eventually, Varudhini and Venkatapati lost all their money. In a fit of rage, Varudhini arranged to have Ramanatha babu murdered. Later she regretted her action and committed suicide, unaware that her plan had failed. Ramanatha babu was not murdered.

Venkatapati realized that he was in no position to support either himself or his son. He brought Ravi back to the village but could not face his father. He told Ravi to go to

his grandfather, Sambayya, and left. Sambayya welcomed Ravi into his home and started teaching him farming technique.

Ramanatha babu had a soft corner for Ravi, despite his sleazy dealings with Varudhini. He came to the village and told Sambayya that he would like to arrange for Ravi's education in the city.

Sambayya left the decision to Ravi. Ravi chose to stay with his grandfather.

A few women writers wrote novels to give voice to their ideologies. Unlike the social consciousness novels, these are didactic in nature and the authors are the narrators.

Lata and Ranganayakamma started writing in the early fifties, and became household names within a short period. Both courted the social cause with great fervor, dug deeper into the root causes and vehemently opposed the injustices dealt to women in our society.

There is, however, a difference between the two authors in their approach to the issues. Lata's quest for answers is not only about the injustice in the society but also the philosophical meaning of life. In that, Lata accepts the Hindu religion and its tenets. Ranganayakamma, on the other hand, believes that Hinduism is the root cause of all evils. She rejects religion, the caste system and a host of others that have been the foundation of Hindu society for centuries.

Having said that, let us examine first a novel by Lata, *Gali padagalu--Neeti budagalu* [Kites and Water bubbles]. The novel portrays prostitutes on the streets from their own perspective and the gruesome life they have been forced to live. It opens with a captivating remark that "the city was stretching like a prostitute, exhausted by demonic sex". A brief description of the brothel house follows:

A brothel house, run by Rajamma, was located in Vijayawada. Nine women were living under her roof and working for her.

One of them, Damayanti, met Suseela, who arrived in town recently. Suseela played extra roles in the movies and offered sexual favors for additional income. She moved to Vijayawada hoping for a better life. Ironically, she ended up once again in the same situation, in Rajamma's brothel house.

Suseela described prostitution in the movie industry in Madras. Damayanti and the others were astounded by her story.

The nine women described the pain caused by their clients—a writer, a doctor, and a chettiar (businessman). The writer was in the habit of sleeping with the prostitutes at night and writing about their horrible stories the next day. His wife was aware of his sordid conduct. She criticized his hypocrisy frequently.

Pantulu, a philanthropist, opened an ashram to save the prostitutes and give them a decent life. A compassionate woman, Parvati, joined hands with him to help the destitute women. They took in three women to start with. The three women did not trust the intentions of Pantulu and Parvati. They even suspected of an illicit relationship between the two.

Pantulu approached the writer and asked him for a donation for his ashram. The writer called it a sham and threw him out. Pantulu met with scorn whichever way he turned; he could not raise one paisa in donations. Out of desperation, he suggested to Parvati to go to Madras, become a movie star, and support the ashram. Parvati agreed rather reluctantly and moved to Madras.

One day, the writer found out that Sumitra, the woman he was sleeping with, had contracted syphilis. Sumitra begged him to arrange for her treatment. He offered no



help and left the place quickly. Sumitra was disgusted, decided to sleep with other men out of vengeance and spread the disease. She gave some money to Sita and persuaded her to join Pantulu's ashram.

Sumitra committed suicide. The writer felt guilty and remorse. His wife resented his pretensions and fired away a volley of curses at him. The writer stopped visiting brothel houses. He even started giving donations to the ashram on a regular basis.

Pantulu arranged Sita's marriage with a lower division clerk, Subba Rao. Subba Rao agreed to marry Sita for the five thousand rupees reward Parvati had offered. He never trusted Sita and would not accept Sita's child as his.

One day the child became sick. Subba Rao refused to give money for the child's medication. Sita was disillusioned and went back to Rajamma's house.

A woman writer named Madhavidevi came to Rajamma's house to gather information for her book on prostitutes. She was horrified by their stories. She invited Sita to her house to learn more about her. Sita was taken by her kindness and impressed by her wealth.

After a few days, life became unbearable for Sita. She left her child on Madhavidevi's doorstep and committed suicide.

Parvati was disillusioned after learning how Sita's marriage had ended. She received a letter from Pantulu informing that the ashram had failed; one woman ran away with one of the visitors, the second woman died, and the third went back to the brothel house.

Another friend of Parvati, Annapurna came to see her. She told Parvati that her own husband had turned her into a prostitute. She came to Parvati, hoping to change her life.

Parvati introduced her to Madhavidevi. Madhavidevi, with all the information she had gathered, wrote a novel called *Gali padagalu- Neeti budagalu* [Kites and Water bubbles] and published it as a serial in a popular weekly magazine.

This grim account speaks of the author's outrage at a society that failed women in general and prostitutes in particular. Unlike most of the Telugu novels, this is not long, only ninety-six pages. Yet each line is poignant, each paragraph is filled with the author's caustic comments on the devious nature of men.

As I mentioned in chapter 2, the book met with harsh criticism. That did not stop Lata though. She wrote a second novel, *Raktapankam* [Quagmire of Blood], on the same subject, a longer version of the same story.

Ranganayakamma believes that our traditional values kept woman under subjugation and hindered any progress, which might have been otherwise feasible. She is highly confrontational in her novels, and expressive of her opposition to patriarchal society, caste system, male domination, oppression of women, and so on.

*Balipeetham* [Sacrificial Stone] is one of her early novels, which depicts her views on inter-caste marriages based on altruistic principles.

Here is a synopsis:

Bhaskar was a young doctor, a Harijan by birth. He started out as a volunteer in a shelter for the homeless, and soon became a full-time administrator. At first, he had no intentions to marry anyone. But his friends convinced him that marriage was a fulfilling part of one's life. He met a young woman named Tara accidentally. He wanted to marry her. He was waiting for the right time to propose.

Before he had a chance to propose to Tara, he was sent to Hyderabad on business. In Hyderabad, his long-time friend, Ramanatham, arranged for him to meet with a Brahmin child widow, Aruna. Aruna had a severe heart condition.

Bhaskar and Aruna talked freely and openly. She told him that her one dream in life was to die as a *sumangali*, the status of being a married woman, a much-coveted status for Hindu women.

Bhaskar was moved by her condition and her frankness, and proposed to her. "I will consider this an opportunity God has bestowed on me. If I could fulfill the one wish of one desperate woman, I will consider myself blessed," he told her. Then he added, "I have no intention of hiding my caste. I am a Harijan." Aruna accepted his proposal. They were engaged.

Bhaskar admitted her in a clinic famous for nature cure. After she recovered, they were married. Soon Aruna started noticing the differences in their lifestyles and beliefs. She wanted to live up to her family customs, which included rituals and celebrations in style. Bhaskar preferred a low-key, modest lifestyle. While the disagreements were driving them farther and farther apart, they had a daughter.

In the past, Aruna had been married to her maternal uncle's son. Her uncle, Sastry, and aunt, Jagadamba, had performed the wedding while Aruna and the boy were little kids. The boy died leaving Aruna a child widow. Aruna had no memories of this first marriage.

Both Sastry and Jagadamba were dead set against Aruna's marriage with Bhaskar from the beginning. They contributed heavily in making Aruna develop negative thoughts about Bhaskar's family and their customs. Things started turning sour.

Bhaskar, at his sister's request, brought his nephew, Gopi, to their home to help him with his education. Aruna was not pleased with this arrangement but did not object.

Bhaskar went to Bombay for a year for training in Cooperation. Aruna moved to her uncle's home for the period with her daughter and Gopi. Prior to his departure, Bhaskar advised his wife to obtain her Bachelor's degree and get a job, and pay off the outstanding debts. Aruna agreed. Eventually she obtained her degree and got a job.

Bhaskar returned from Bombay and realized that, during his absence, Gopi had been treated as an errand boy, and Aruna had gone overboard with expenses. Contrary to their original plan, Aruna had not paid off the outstanding loans.

Aruna started suspecting him of infidelity. She went back to live with her uncle and aunt. Bhaskar filed a petition in court seeking her return to him. The court ruled in his favor. Aruna ignored the court order and stayed with her uncle and aunt. Aruna was pregnant with their second child.

Aruna's sister, Vimala, decided to marry an Anglo-Indian young man, James. Both Bhaskar and Aruna tried to explain the pitfalls in inter-caste marriages. Vimala convinced them that their (hers and James') decision was based on love and not on some offbeat ideology.

Sastry and Jagadamba began to ill-treat Aruna and her children. Aruna was feeling financial pressures in addition to the pain caused by her failed marriage. The situation caused her heart condition to relapse.

The naturopathy doctor, who had cured her earlier, offered to treat her free of charge. She was admitted into the clinic. There was no improvement in her condition. She understood that Bhaskar was paying her bills anonymously. At her request,

Bhaskar came to visit her and she died in his arms as *sumangali*, just the way she had wanted to die. Bhaskar performed the death rituals also appropriate for a *sumangali*, per Aruna's wishes.

Ranganayakamma dealt with this theme of man-woman relationship in her later novels also. She broadened her perspective and correlated it to the patriarchal society and Marxist ideology.

Not many Telugu female writers proved their aptitude in writing romance and humor, but the few who had tried their hand in these genres made history. In the fiction written by Bhanumati Ramakrishna and Yeddanapudi Sulochana Rani, the core issue is not so much the story as conveying a *rasa*, a mood or an experience effectively. In Bhanumati's stories, it is *hasya rasa* [humor] and in Sulochana Rani, it is *sringara rasa* [romance].

The first romance novel in modern Telugu fiction by a female writer was *cakrabhramanam* [The Revolving Wheel] by Koduri Kausalyadevi, serialized in *Andhra prabha* weekly in the early sixties. Soon after, Sulochana Rani entered the field with her first novel, *Secretary*. Both Kausalyadevi and Sulochana Rani enjoyed extraordinary popularity in the sixties and seventies. Sulochana Rani has considerable readership even today.

Sulochana Rani's talent lay in her narration, in capturing the readers' attention and keeping them on toes for months on end.

Here is a synopsis of her first novel, *Secretary*:

A young beautiful middle-class woman, Jayanti, started as secretary at a women's organization. One day she went to a member's house for her signature on some papers. The member was not home. Her husband attempted assault on Jayanti. Jayanti managed to escape, and later understood that she was not going to get any support from the organization in such matters.

She met a handsome and influential young man, Raja Sekharam, also known as Sekharam. At the organization, push came to shove and Jayanti submitted her resignation. While waiting for the bus, Sekharam saw her, and offered her ride to her home. On the way, she told him about her resignation. He offered her a job as secretary in his home office.

Jayanti and Sekharam were attracted to each other but neither was willing to admit it openly. Jayanti fell sick. She needed surgery and Sekharam took care of her during her sickness.

Jayanti learned that Sekharam had been close to other women in the past. She decided to abide her time.

Jayanti's grandmother, her only living relative, fell ill. Sekharam brought both of them to his home and helped them. During their stay, he learned from the grandmother that they were related, which made him Jayanti's cross cousin, an eligible bridegroom for her. The grandmother died. Sekharam insisted that Jayanti should stay in his house since she had no other place to go, and Jayanti agreed.

One of the members at the women's organization sought Jayanti's help in arranging her daughter's marriage with Sekharam. Jayanti, disheartened, left town, and after a few mishaps, landed a job in Madras. During her stay in Madras, she learned that Sekharam and Vijayalakshmi, her boss, had known each other.

Jayanti accidentally met Sivaram, a former employee of Sekharam. Sivaram advised her to go back to Sekharam. Jayanti returned to her hometown and married Sekharam.

The novel had all the elements of a romance novel. The most important element, which could not be captured in the synopsis, is its readability. That in fact is the strongest forte of Sulochana Rani.

I attempted to show the range of topics that characterized women's fiction in the fifties and sixties. The topics ranged from women's issues to social evils and human conditions. On the home front, they dealt with the awareness of one's identity initially at a basic level, a feeble attempt to make other members be aware of it, and vocalize their protest. Issues of rites of passage for youth and their search for new directions, the newly emerging problems surrounding the educated woman, and personal relationships also were portrayed. In terms of the social and metaphysical issues, a wide variety of topics such as fear, hunger, self-awareness among the working class, and social evils like caste system and prostitution were part of the fiction of this era. Another angle in some of the novels was poignant questions relating to the meaning of life, purpose of life and death.

This is only a tiny sample of the enormous amount of fiction published during this period. Numerous writers such as K. Ramalakshmi, Aravinda, Vacaspati, Parimala Someswar, Abburi Chaya Devi, Adimadhyam Ramanamma, I. V. S. Atchyutavalli, Kavilipati Vijayalakshmi, Polkampalli Santadevi, and Pavani Nirmala Prabhavati had written on numerous topics relevant to the times.

I included a list of the writers from this period. Let me however stress that it is only a partial list. That is one of the areas further research is needed.

Let us examine their craftsmanship in the stories presented in this chapter.

## 4. CRAFTING THEIR STORIES

The synopses provided in the preceding chapter help to familiarize readers with the range of themes in the fiction by women writers in the fifties and sixties, and to facilitate a discussion of their craft of storytelling.

The women writers of the fifties and sixties narrated their stories in the tradition they grew up with. In evaluating their works, we need to make this important distinction. Let me briefly explain my views.

The critiques by the learned critics published so far included women writers nominally and comments on their works from an academic perspective marginally. Presumably, the critics judged fiction in step with western methodology, which meant scrutinizing structure, development of plot, solution or denouement, characterization, diction, and the author's point of view or message, as prevalent in the textbooks of western methodology. In contrast, Telugu women writers told their stories in the style they had been accustomed to—the oral tradition. A vast majority of readers responded to that technique for the same reason. They also grew up in the same tradition, and thus felt at home with those stories.

To put it differently, while the academy continued to disregard or dismiss the fiction by women writers as non-literature based on their criteria, the public embraced it to a point hitherto unknown because they felt at home with the technique that was present in the women's fiction.

In this period, most of the readers possessed minimal education. The three elements mattered most to them were theme, conflict and resolution. In general, non-scholar readers would not make a conscious effort to look for other elements such as plot, development, characterization and linguistic peculiarities. I do not mean that these elements will have no bearing on the story's appeal to the readers. My position is that the readers tend to overlook such specifics and continue to read the story. They continue to read even when the integrity or structure is remiss, characterization unrealistic, and the diction imperfect. On the other hand, critics go to great lengths to scrutinize the structure, the opening, presentation of the problem or conflict, development, resolution or denouement, language and imagery systematically. Possibly, this accounted for the academy's dismissal of the women writers' fiction as non-literature.

In this chapter, I will attempt to highlight the salient features that were instrumental in capturing the widest audience. I will also include a few comments on some of the elements from an academic standpoint. Presumably, it helps to study the two perspectives in juxtaposition and underscore the distinction the readers had made in their appreciation of the women's writing during this period.

A major breakthrough in the fiction of the fifties was the awareness of woman's identity. For the first time, the women writers moved away from the bhakti tradition, in which the woman devoted herself entirely to the prosperity of her husband and the family, and turned to self, in which she saw herself as an individual, conscious of her needs and desires. She became aware of her right to feel good about herself.

The story, "*eduru chuusina muhurtam*" [The Long Awaited Moment], opens with a six-year-old girl, Durga, yearning for a frock, just like the one her friend at school had. She asks her mother, without success. That is the first and last time she has ever asked

anybody for anything for herself. She does not understand why her mother yelled at her but she has learned the one lesson that there is no point in asking. That is the reality of middle-class economics.

However, the crux of the issue is neither their financial position nor her silence but her awareness of the fact that nobody has acknowledged her as an individual. She desperately wants somebody to view her as a person and show somebody cares, bring something for her, tell her that *I brought this for you*. Even after she starts earning, she does not see that kind of concern for her in the family members. She is in a position to buy something for herself but that is not what she wants. She hopes that someone else would say at least that *you go and buy something for yourself*. That does not happen either. Instead, her mother expresses relief that Durga's income will come in handy for her younger sister's education and other household expenses. Durga is completely disgusted with life, "What a miserable life! Whatever have I done to deserve this? Is this a curse from my past life? There is not one person who feels like spending one paisa on me, why?" The last question sums up the protagonist's yearning to be recognized as an individual.

The author, Saraladevi, weaves the story from start to finish, from childhood to death, through a series of incidents, each incident reinforcing the one perception, that of the protagonist—her acute awareness that she is not recognized as a person. This issue is not limited to her family alone.

The social context also plays a critical role. Durga starts noticing the people around her ever since she has turned six. She sees the things her friends have been showing around and wants the same things they have—the printed frock of Padma at school, red ribbons, a new school bag, and dolls to make other girls jealous of her. She is mortified since she has no answer when somebody asks her, "Where is your new saree?" When her friends show her their new items, and say, "My brother brought it from Bangalore", or "My sister got it from Delhi", all she can do is to stare at them, heartbroken. Will she ever be in a position to say similar words in her life? If not a saree, a piece of ribbon, at least. No, that has never happened as long as she lived.

I could not help wondering what if she did not have to compare her lot with others at school or in town constantly? What are the mores in our society that are driving us constantly to compare ourselves with the others around us?

In the final analysis, Durga was not able to realize her one wish. In her childhood days, she never had an opportunity to show off her new clothes and make her friends jealous of her. In her adult life, there was no occasion validating her existence as an individual.

The overriding message in the story is the protagonist's wish to be acknowledged as an individual in relation not only to the family but to the society as well.

The moment she has been waiting in her entire life comes at the end but by now, she is far beyond feeling it. Somebody in the room says, "We need a new saree to drape the dead body". Son offers to bring it, "reaching for his earnings in his pocket." That is the final blow for a person who wants to be recognized as an individual in her lifetime. Additionally, the statement also speaks of the emptiness of rituals. The reader can almost hear the protagonist ask, "Why did you not think of it while I was alive?"

The narrative is well structured. The conversations are taken from everyday life. This story is one example of the way the women writers would take the dialogues from their living rooms and kitchens and use them to make a powerful statement.

The awareness of one's identity—a woman's perception of self in relation to the family and society—originated in the fifties and further developed in the sixties. This portrayal

varied from a simple perception in their own minds to mild protests and then to highly vocalized statements.

The story "*maadanta mabbu*" [A Fleck of Cloud] projects yet another perspective of the same theme. The protagonist in this story is aware of not only her identity but also her husband's one weakness, jealousy. In the process, she learns that, between the two of them, she is the one who can save their marriage. The narrative is particularly evocative for the way natural climate is built into the story.

The story opens with a short description, "At a distance, a fleck of cloud appeared hanging over the farm. Bhagyam returned home from the lake, put down the pot and started reminiscing. She felt a shower of nectar in her heart. In the next moment, she shuddered."

These four sentences suggest the incidents to follow. The fleck of cloud at the start brings a downpour at the end. This reminds me of a Telugu proverb, *chiliki chiliki gaalivaana ayindi*, meaning little sprinkles turned into a tornado. She holds a pot full of water and feels a shower of nectar at heart—symbolic of abounding life. She is scared in the next second. She shudders at the thought of what might follow after her laugh at the lake.

These images set the stage for the pleasure and pain she has been experiencing in her life. There are only two incidents for the reader to understand the conditions at their home. Bhagyam and Peddiraju are cousins. They are raised by Peddiraju's mother. Therefore, we may assume that Bhagyam is fully aware of his jealous nature. "Bava cannot tolerate even when I speak with anyone other than himself. He is strange in that sense. In all other matters, he is no other than the God himself."

There are two sets of incidents, running parallel to let the reader know the complete story of their marital bliss: One set illustrating his affection for her and the other depicting his jealous nature, which sets off the conflict in their marriage. All the incidents except the last one are narrated in flashback.

The first incident takes place when Peddiraju goes to a village fair and returns early. He sees his wife with flowers in her hair and a glass of milk on the ledge. He is upset, which confuses Bhagyam. The precise explanation is not given for the husband's anger or wife's confusion but left to readers' imagination—a common practice in oral tradition. The author notes, "the rooster crowed by the time Bhagyam has finished explaining the items in question to her husband. Peddiraju felt mortified for suspecting her and was ashamed of his behavior". That is sufficient for the purpose of narration. The author wastes no words.

Bhagyam continues to give us her husband's good side. He pays attention to her likes and dislikes. On one occasion, the village munsif's wife gave her two lotus fruits. Bhagyam said they were her favorite fruits. The next day, Peddiraju jumped into the lake risking his life and brought a huge bunch of the lotus fruits. Bhagyam was touched and her eyes were filled with tears of joy. She is aware that his horoscope says large bodies of water are a menace to his life. In that sense, he risked his life to make her happy. Similarly, at the end, he remembers his promise and brings the black saree with gold-threaded moon print for her.

They both are aware of the problem that is tearing them apart, and both want their marriage to work. Human nature being what it is nobody is perfect. The husband has a weakness and the wife is willing to make allowance for her husband's one weakness since he also proves to be a very caring person. She understands the value of 'give and take' as an important and pragmatic approach in a relationship. Additionally, for a woman to feel responsible for keeping the family together and make it work has been all too common in our culture. In a way, it stresses the woman's sensitivity in these matters.

In the final episode, he keeps his promise but does not have the patience to wait for her or her explanation. For all he knew, she is not even aware of his return at the time. So, what made Peddiraju not to wait for his wife and ask for an explanation? My guess is that that is the breaking point. Possibly the author is trying to tell us that the little sprinkles turn into a heavy downpour at some point. There is always a time when things break if not fixed in time and in the appropriate manner.

The imagery—the lightning which bounced from the supper plates and the incessant downpour—is a premonition of possible happy end. Bouncing is indicative of return and downpour may be symbolic of life.

The settings in these two stories give us glimpses of two different environments. The first story, "The Long Awaited Moment", happens in a middle-class home in the city. The second story, "A Fleck of Cloud", takes place in a rural setting.

A few stories depicted female characters, which are naïve at first and then become vocal, as and when necessary.

In the story, "A Desperate Cry", the experience of a working class woman is taken to illustrate the insecurities of the middle-class women in our society. The story opens with Kannamma, a working class woman, showing up at the doorstep of Radha, a middle-class housewife. It begins with Kannamma telling her miseries to Radha and ends with Radha realizing the insecurity in her own marriage.

In terms of technique, the author needs to create an environment that is convincing to the middle-class readers. Ranganayakamma used Kannamma's story to achieve that end.

In the opening paragraph, Kannamma tells Radha how every man she has come across tried to hurt her. In one instance where her brother-in-law proposes to marry her, it is not an act of violence. Even as he points out himself, it is common in their caste for a woman to remarry. He has not violated any rule. Then why did Kannamma reject his proposition, if she was looking for security? In this, I think the author created a condition for the middle-class readers to identify themselves with Kannamma—an indirect but clever way to appeal to the middle-class readers. Otherwise, they could settle comfortably, and convince themselves that they are "not like her."

That may also account for the twist at the end. The desperate cry comes not from Kannamma, the original protagonist, but from Radha, a middle-class woman. Once again, the chances of readers empathizing with Radha are greater than with Kannamma.

A brief note about the ending is appropriate here. In a personal letter addressed to me, Ranganayakamma had mentioned that Kannamma was a person in real life, the experiences narrated in the story were true and, Kannamma in real life committed suicide by jumping into a well. In the story, Kannamma simply leaves Radha's house. The readers would not know what happened to Kannamma. After she left, it turns into Radha's story.

The story opens with Kannamma's desperate predicament but not with Radha's concern for the mores of her husband. It stands to reason for us to expect the desperate cry to come from Kannamma. This shift in focus from Kannamma to Radha can be viewed as a structural flaw. The tragedy of the real life Kannamma has not been accounted for. The rationale for this, I believe, is the author's concern with the issues of middle-class women.

A second flaw in the structure is the lengthy incident involving the sickness and the possible death of the grandmother. The incident is intended for Radha to be away from home for a few days, thus providing an opportunity for the husband to transgress. The question however is whether this lengthy episode, filled with frivolous arguments between Radha and her brothers and sisters, is justified in a story about the miseries of a working class woman. Once again, I need to refer to the aforementioned letter, wherein the author



had given me permission to abridge the scene at my discretion. I kept the entire text in my translation though, which is posted on my website ([www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net)).

I believe Ranganayakamma introduced the episode as a comic relief in this otherwise gloomy story. Digression is an element of oral tradition and humor is an intrinsic part of our culture. Readers had no problem in accepting this kind of digression in the fiction of the fifties and the sixties.

The narrative, as a whole, is not strong structurally, but each incident makes an interesting reading. That is what appealed to a vast majority of the readers in the sixties. The integrity suffers from an academic standpoint.

The literary career of Sridevi barely stretched over a period of one decade yet she had written a few remarkable stories dealing with the issues of youth of her times. Like many writers of this period, Sridevi was superb in creating convincing characters—husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, grandparents, children, and neighbors. In "People Ahead of Their Times," the setting, crowded with uncles, aunts, and cousins, is an authentic representation of a middle class home.

For young Rama Rao (Ramam), who has just turned sixteen, the entire gamut of relatives and their ways are overwhelming. The characters are real, with all their idiosyncrasies and frailties. Readers can relate to them right away.

Srinivasulu is the only person that makes sense to Ramam. His logic about maintaining a household with two wives may or may not be acceptable but the insecurities and the weaknesses of all other characters are all but too familiar to the readers. That is what captured their interest. That Srinivasulu was promoting the wrong kind of ethics did not bother them. The story illustrates the human frailties, which many people do not admit openly. It was a wake up song for many, a song nonetheless.

Rama Rao first goes to the city because his father told him to. He sees the light of day only after Srinivasulu laid out the life he (Ramam) was going to have for the rest of his life, which is to live according to the dictates of his father or somebody else. His decision at the end to defy his father and attend college is a step in the right direction. It is a rite of passage for him. However, the tradition is not easy to shake off; it is not in his blood. For that reason, he does not go straight to his father but goes to the beach, where he will have time to rehearse what he is going to tell his father. That is a convincing ending.

The message in effect is not one of ethical values but of worldly wisdom. Srinivasulu and his wife have solved their financial problems by inviting the 'other woman' into their home. All his relatives who hated his morals or guts or both, have no problem in taking money from the same woman they have been badmouthing.

The complexities of human nature surpass the wisdom the schools and colleges teach. That being the message, sending the young man to an educational institution by way of buying time is superb in terms of technique!

Hunger is a universal problem. While the poor are starving and putting up a fierce battle for each morsel of food, persons of means are sitting in the comforts of their home, and thrashing out possible solutions or passing judgments. Kameswari depicts the issue from a different perspective in her story, "*idi katha kaadu*" [This Is Not Fiction].

The story opens with a working class mother roughing up her little daughter on the street. Readers, along with the narrator, wonder how any mother could be so cruel towards a little child. The characters of the mother and the child unfold gradually. Arguments on both sides of the issue—some condemning it and others supporting the actions of the mother vouch for the author's insights into the issue of poverty and hunger.

The child's death is not the end of the story, though. In a skillful twist, the author takes the story to a new level. Like self-sacrifice in bhakti tradition, the maternal instinct and familial bond are overplayed in our fiction, sometimes to a point of fault. Kameswari depicts the anomaly of that approach.

In the first half of the story, a few middle-class women are critical of the maternal instincts of a lower class woman, and they speak in harsh terms. In the second half of the story, after the child's death, the focus shifts to the maternal instincts of the middle-class woman, the narrator. This is one more dimension that adds to the story in a larger context—the attitudes and hypocrisies of the middle class. The question raised by the narrator at the end is a poignant summation of all these elements:

"Is there anything more ridiculous than I commenting on the virtue of maternal instinct and familial bond, when I could not wait for my son more than one hour and a half?"

The message appears to be, only those who had experienced hunger or other physical pain for that matter can grasp the intensity of suffering at its worst. Others may lecture, debate and pronounce judgments but can never really grasp the extent of it.

The story is well written in terms of structure, characterization, and narration. In addition, the narrative contains the multilevel structure that is common in oral tradition. For readers, one story is not just about making one point. It depicts the core issue from several angles and in more than one situation.

The only flaw I think is in the title, "This is not Fiction", which is flat. I would like to think, maybe naïvely, that this story escaped the critics' attention because of the fuzzy title. In the fifties and sixties, giving suitable titles was a skill yet to be mastered by some of the writers.

R. Vasundhara Devi's long story, "*penjeekatikavvala*", [Far Beyond the Dense Darkness] is a philosophical narrative, reflecting on the significance of life, the relevance or irrelevance of material possessions, and death. The title is a phrase taken from a popular Telugu verse, a prayer, which roughly translates as, "I bow to that Supreme Soul, at whose behest the world is created, in whom it lies dormant and into whom it is integrated; and who lives manifest far beyond the dense darkness."

The story opens with a crisp description of a wealthy neighborhood, which the ordinary people can comprehend only by a stretch of imagination and a colony of the poor right next to it. Additionally, there is a burial ground, constantly emitting revolting smells from the smoldering dead bodies.

Then follows a description of Jayalakshmi's character. Jayalakshmi hates the poor and the burial ground. At the same time, she cannot explain why she has chosen to live in that neighborhood which she hated so much. She suffers from frequent lapses into logical thinking. She is very kind and concerned in one moment, and irascible in the next. Sometimes she is very happy; her heart jumps with joy for no apparent reason, love abounds, and then she is kind to her husband, children, and every human being she has come across. She experiences the meaning, the very essence and fullness of life. At other times, she finds life insipid and meaningless. All the ties—husband, children, and all other relationships in the world—seem to be restrictive and selfish. Then, she finds all the things like decency, kindness and love illusory. Depression fills her heart and a sense of futility pulls her down.

This paradox in her character as well as her mode of thinking pervades the entire story. Each incident is built around this one character. Each time Jayalakshmi is thrown into a bout of the same haunting questions repeatedly. Questions such as "What is the meaning of this

incident or that incident? Who am I? Why things happened the way they did? Is there a message? Am I supposed to do something about it?" constantly haunt her.

Although the story is too long for a short story, probably, it is necessary considering the gravity of the central issue. The reader needs to feel the intensity of the internal struggle of the protagonist, and at the end, arrive at a conclusion similar to that of the protagonist. At the end, she comes to terms with herself, and "her heart is filled with joy. All these things will be here even when I am not. All these people, the trees, the birds, the sun, and the sky ... they all continue to exist in this world."

Simply stated, the story, "Far beyond the Dense Darkness", is a personal journey of a truth-seeker. During one of our conversations, Vasundhara Devi mentioned that it was about revelation of the Ultimate Truth that is manifest in a place far beyond the densest darkness, and the protagonist's intense struggle to acquire that knowledge.

The second strong point in this story is the narrative technique. Each incident is crafted with several details, which helps to invoke the specific image or environment in the reader's mind. The first description of the neighborhood at the beginning and the cancer patients' ward at the hospital vouch for the author's attention to detail.

Two stories by Acanta Saradadevi are significant for their unique style. The author succeeded in recreating the pensive undertone without making it a tedious reading.

The story, "The Escaped Parrot" opens with the description of nature.

Big chunks of clouds are scurrying around in the sky as if they are in a hurry. A small white fleck of cloud slithers in one direction and another baby cloud in the other direction. Then the two stop in the middle and merge into one piece. In a split second, they break up and each goes its own way. They are taking over the sky and changing into different shapes ... like scattered cotton balls, or jasmines that slipped away.

Kamakshamma sat by the back door, watching the floating clouds. She is depressed. How quickly the clouds are changing shapes! ... Before one can get used to one shape, it is changing into another! They all are slithering away so beautifully! Embracing each other snugly and breaking away the next moment! Momentary attachment!

These two paragraphs set the mood for the reader. The entire story reverberates with the stillness that filled the home and her heart. Her husband built that house on the outskirts since he liked peace and quiet, wanted to live far away from the hustle and bustle of the city. The irony is he is never there to enjoy that peace and quiet; and what is worse, he is not even aware of it. She is left with the quietude, which she has not asked for. She is tired of it.

She asks him, "All your work is in the city. Why not we move to the city?" He says, "How can we get this peace and quiet in the city?" He leaves at dawn and returns home after it has gotten dark. Only he should know what kind of peace and quiet he is enjoying. Kamakshamma cannot understand but does not say a word.

The main plot stresses the anomalies in his mode of thinking. Sundara Rao talks about the peace and quiet but has no time to enjoy it, does not even attempt to make time to enjoy it. He seems to be stuck on the pigeonhole images of what is important in life, without understanding its ramifications.

The secondary plot in the story is human relations. Sundara Rao inherited the garden on the outskirts of the town, and built the house because he wanted, or thought he wanted to enjoy the peace and quietude. He thought, "It would be nice to have *a thing called wife* in the house," and married Kamakshamma. The phrase *a thing called wife* conveys powerfully

his mode of thinking. For him, wife is an adjunct, a material possession similar to the house and the garden. His reason to marry is not that he needed someone to run the household. He has servants for that. He is never bored because the city is there for his entertainment. From the curt one-line conversations he has with his wife, it does not appear that he needs her for company at home. The one question that keeps coming up is why did he marry? This is one more example of women's awareness of the lack of communication between husbands and wives. Additionally, it points to women's awareness as individuals.

Kamakshamma does not seem to know what she wanted out of life until she has bonded with the parrot. She comes from a middle class family with limited means. She never had much of jewelry. When her marriage with Sundara Rao was arranged, her first question was, "Will they give me the entire set of jewelry, head to foot?" As it turned out, Sundara Rao's mother had plenty of jewelry and Kamakshamma became the sole beneficiary of all that jewelry. For some time, the loneliness in her husband's home did not bother her, since she grew up as the only child at her home. Now she has nothing to do since servants take care of the chores. She wears her jewelry, looks at herself in the mirror and be happy. After twelve years however, she is tired of the jewelry, the old battery-operated radio, and the husband who is in no mood for a friendly chat. Everything around her looks insipid. The jewelry becomes bothersome but she cannot remove them. "We by ourselves invite these attachments into our lives. Eventually they become burdensome yet we cannot break away from them," the narrator comments.

Into Kamakshamma's uneventful life, a bird with a broken leg enters. That is the first sign of radiance in her life. She starts building a new life around that bird, which does not last more than six months. After the bird flew away, she understands, for the first time, the value of freedom.

All the events—her marriage to Sundara Rao, moving into her new home on the outskirts of the town, the resounding solitude in and around that house are described powerfully. Her husband's reference to the peace and quietude sounds hollow in the face of his daily commute to the city. While he talks about it, the wife is at the receiving end of the peace and quiet she has not asked for. Her mental state is described succinctly in just four lines.

Six months passed by. Kamakshamma's heart was jubilant. Chinnari's [the parrot's] heart in the cage squealed. Kamakshamma's face was lit up as she smiled. Chinnari's wings flapped against the cage walls until exhausted.

These four lines conceptualize the entire theme. The bird is a metaphor for Kamakshamma. Her interest in the jewelry is her handicap parallel to the injured leg of the bird. In both the cases, the snare is accidental. Sundara Rao put Kamakshamma in a beautiful house the same way Kamakshamma put the bird in a cage. It is befitting that Kamakshamma should comprehend the depth of the analogy only after the bird flew away. By contrast, Sundara Rao never understood Kamakshamma's mental state. He could not understand why she was pining for the bird or what he did to her life. Possibly the underlying message is "only those who experienced pain can understand the depth and intensity of it".

The narrative builds up slowly and systematically. There are no needless details, no philosophical lectures. A simple narrative from the heart of a woman who felt the unfathomable depth of quietude. The secondary plot illustrating all human beings, men and women, would want another living soul to anchor around is equally important. The story may appear to be from a woman's perspective but I think the author has generalized her perspective successfully. After all, Sundara Rao has found his company in the city.

So far, I have discussed short stories illustrating the range of women's writing. Now I shall discuss the novels by the women writers of the fifties and the sixties. They have produced novels in record numbers. Several of them wrote a few but others wrote several novels. These novels highlight their sensitivity and talent in depicting larger issues.

In the next few pages, I will discuss the six novels for which themes have been provided in the preceding chapter.

One of the most popular subjects during this period was the educated woman and the new challenges she was facing subsequent to her newly acquired education. The two novels, *Champakam and Parasites* and *the Transformed Values*, by two popular writers of the time illustrate two perspectives of the same issue.

Every phase of progress comes with a downside to it. Education and the subsequent earning power alone are not enough to provide freedom for women in the Indian context. There is no freedom until and unless the old family values change as well.

In *Champakam and the Parasites*, the novel opens with the young Champakam in her music class. Champakam, sitting in a corner, has been noticed by a benevolent stranger despite her shy demeanor. Her shyness is befitting a typical young woman in middle-class families. That she is noticed by a stranger, Lalji, is unusual and captures reader's interest.

A discussion between her older brother, Satyam, and her domineering mother follows. They decide not to tell Champakam about the offer by Lalji. That part is unusual. The traditional values require family members to look after each other's interests. We do not see that here. The brother and mother collude to ruin Champakam's chances for a better life. Possibly the brother is jealous and the mother has always been supportive of son. Arguably she does not have complete details, and thus not in a position to make an informed decision.

Eventually, Champakam's earning power becomes a pivotal point in the story. Her brother and mother never liked her getting education to begin with. Yet they have no problem taking her money. Strange as it may sound, in our homes, earning power for a woman does not translate into freedom from family ties and responsibilities. It actually works the other way. A woman, who is normally considered a burden to the family, becomes an asset because of her earning power. The male family members, who are not supposed to take woman's money [called *stri dhanam*] according to tradition, are now using her money freely, often for their pleasures rather than for any valid reason, which in itself is a major departure from tradition.

The problem reaches climax when her impending marriage is ruined by Kamala, her brother's fiancé. Kamala uses Indu to add a chemical compound in Champakam's facial cream. The episode in which Kamala uses Indu to disfigure Champakam's face is handled skillfully. "I did not ask you to do anything," Kamala says slowly, "That is a lie. I did not ask you to do anything. You just imagined that I did. You always imagine things. You are crazy". Kamala is the first one to notice Indu's gullibility and take advantage of it.

After sustaining burns, Champakam grows stronger. She is able to stand up to Raja Rao and tell him that things between the two are not the same anymore; and the love he had for her cannot possibly be there anymore. He will not be able to say, "You are beautiful" without being hypocritical, she argues. This is one of the powerful episodes in the story. Champakam displays unusual strength of character as she poses the question to Raja Rao.

At the end, she shows the same courage one more time when she confronts her mother. After receiving a copy of Lalji's will, she understands there might be something more to it than she has known and confronts her mother.

Most of the writers during this period identified the problems surrounding the "educated woman" but were not sure of envisioning credible solutions. As a result, we find death/suicide as a solution in many stories of this decade.

Champakam leaves an upbeat note, prior to committing suicide, that "there is plenty of love and kindness in the world". This final note is not convincing. Why would an intelligent and successful writer like Champakam commit suicide if she genuinely believed that there is plenty of love and kindness in the world?

Secondly, after Champakam starts making good money, the family members depend on her for financial support. After her face has been disfigured, she is depressed. She even shows resentment towards the family members. That being the case, why does she not rebel? Why does she not live her life as she pleased, especially when she has the money to do so? There are no answers to these questions, except the implied, centuries-old tradition of familial bonding. That is the reality in Telugu homes. From academic standpoint, this can be viewed as a flaw in characterization. The protagonist falls short of being a hero.

The central theme is the economic problem an educated woman has been facing at home. In the post-independent Andhra Pradesh, the women's education just started gaining ground in middle class families. Not everybody supported it. Champakam obtained her education, despite the opposition from mother and brother. It was in a nascent stage in the women's education movement.

After she finishes her schooling, she starts writing and making money. Significantly, the family, who objected to her education, do not object to her writing and publishing! That again was a social reality of the times.

Then the next logical question is whether the family has forgiven her writing and publishing for economic reasons. There is no express mention of that attitude in the story.

After Champakam has become a popular writer, she gains self-esteem and starts using make up, and dressing up fashionably. In that context, the narrator comments, "Her eyes are hiding the mischief of the first Champakam from her childhood days, the sadness of the second, and the insubordination of the third Champakam." It is not clear whose voice is that. Is it the narrator's evaluation of Champakam's character or is that how Champakam sees herself? Champakam has not been depicted as having enough courage to rebel. Should we consider her mild protests against her brother and brother-in-law as insubordination? The protests are not strong enough for anybody to take seriously. The brother and brother-in-law do not seem to have taken them seriously or they would not be coming back to her for money until the last day. In the entire novel, there is not a single incident to substantiate the first and the third comments, mischief and insubordination. In terms of integrity, these three episodes are lapses in an otherwise well-knit story.

For the vast majority of readers however the strong points in this novel are the storyline and characterization. The story is about an educated woman and her earning power. Let us not forget that most of the readers were women, and most of them had only minimal education at the time. They could relate to Champakam. Secondly, the setting was a middle class family—brothers, sisters, and their education, the arguments between the siblings, and caring and sharing. Readers could position themselves in that setting and respond to the storyline.

The name Champakam has a metaphorical significance. Champakam is a beautiful flower, orange in color [symbolic of education] and has a strong aroma [symbolic of earning power], both known to attract parasites. Another significant factor is that the parasites themselves, Satyam, Venkat Rao and mother, survive in the story. The other beneficiaries of Champakam's economic status are Radha, Kamala and Indu, and they die.

Raja Rao is a beneficiary-hopeful of her beauty but he fails in his attempt to get her attention and dies. He dies without ever telling Champakam that he genuinely loved her for who she was and not for her looks.

Lalji's death is supposed to bring a ray of hope for Champakam but that does not happen. His death does not serve the intended purpose. There is no reason to kill so many characters. The author seems to have strained to fit the narrative to a known paradigm—a closure for each character.

In the next novel, *The Transformed Values*, we see a broader perspective. It is not a story of one person but of a family. It is a portrayal of the old values taking on a new hue.

Janaki's failed marriage is the pivotal event in the story yet the story goes far beyond her marital status, and to the structure of a new society in the making. In that sense, there is no single moment that can be identified as the crux of the problem. It is a series of incidents and they keep a family moving in a new direction. It is a piece of history.

In *Champakam and the Parasites*, we see one constant struggle, the parasites feeding on Champakam. We see only one side of each of the family members. We do not know what they will say or how they will act in other situations.

Visalakshi covers a broader perspective. While Malati takes individual characters and weaves a story around the development of a character, Visalakshi takes a piece of history and presents it on a wider canvas. In her novel, readers hear everyday conversations in the living rooms and the kitchens of middle class families; find some self-examination on the part of the characters, and some thinking on human level, which provides a more convincing environment overall. The caring for each other among the children including the sister-in-law is authentic. I think many readers responded to this unique talent of Visalakshi.

The opening episode unveils a pronouncement on women's education. Santha announces that she passed the high school exam. Her mother is disappointed that the daughter passed the same test, which her younger son failed. That was one of the prevailing sentiments at the time, which the older women cherished and the younger women resented. As the mother puts it, passing a test is immaterial for girls but a matter of life and death for boys. This is particularly significant in that there is already one woman, in the family, Janaki, who has received education, and has a job. Yet the mother's opinion has not changed. Janaki's education and her earning power does not stop mother from belittling Santha's achievement. Readers would want to know "Why she does not see that?" That is the motivation for the readers to want to continue to read.

The next episode, pivotal in several ways, explains how Janaki has come to receive her education. Her marriage turned into a sham on the very day she was married; it was aborted by the groom's father right after the *tali* was tied, a decisive factor in the marriage ceremony. Technically, she was married by the time the groom walked out on her.

These events—Santha's achievement, Prakasam failing the same exam, Janaki's broken marriage—comprise the conflict in the first chapter, enough to capture readers' interest. Janaki's trip to the railway station in the middle of the night and her confrontation with the bridegroom would not be considered an ordinary event in those days yet the readers appreciated it as a welcome sign in times of changing values.

After that, the author weaves several incidents into the story with flair. All the events—father's death, the eldest son accepting the family responsibilities half-heartedly, Prakasam's entrepreneurship after failing high school and the support he receives from Janaki and Kanakam (sister-in-law), giving a saree to Kanakam on the first anniversary of his business venture, Sambu's suicide, Santha running away from home and returning

disillusioned—they all are developed with flair. The story, as a history of a middle class Telugu family, is strong structurally.

The break up of Janaki's marriage at the beginning is not an everyday incident but not a fabrication either. Visalakshi took a very powerful incident and illustrated how it would affect the lives of the rest of the members in a family. It forced Janaki to take a stand, caused heart failure in the father, created havoc in the mother's mind, and pushed Santha off track from education and caused her to run away with her teenage fantasies.

Acutely aware of the changing values, Janaki supports Prakasam in his new venture in spite of Surya Rao's opposition. The youngest son, Sambu, is a weakling. Janaki tries to reinstate his confidence but to no avail. Sambu misplaces his trust in his eldest brother, who is deep-rooted in traditional values. Sambu has become a casualty in the process. At the end, Surya Rao, unable to cope up with the changes in the system and in his own family, moves to another town. Both, Sambu and Surya Rao are misfits in a society where the intrinsic values started changing dramatically.

A notable slant is depicting Surya Rao as a defender of tradition, and Janaki and Santha, as women with progressive views. Traditionally, women are considered the guardians of tradition. In fact, this is one of the notable features of the sixties' writing. Several stories depicted male characters as ineffective and conservative pitched against strong, sagacious and shrewd women.

Another strong aspect in this novel is characterization. The mother is a traditionalist but confused by the fast changing values. Kanakam is an ordinary, ingenuous woman who accepts everything with almost childish candor. Janaki is willing to take on whatever comes in her way to survive. Prakasam is willing to try new things. They all are depicted astutely. Surya Rao sticks to his old values with uncanny stubbornness and turns Sambu into an imbecile in the process. The special bond between Prakasam and Kanakam is true to life. Similarly, Janaki's trust in Prakasam's abilities, her concern for Sambu's inadequacies, and her fears and forethought concerning Santha are everyday realities in the middle-class families. The novel is aptly named *Marina viluvalu*, transformed values.

In her preface to the novel, Visalakshi referred to a letter she had received from a reader. The reader had commented that the novel was incomplete since the author had not explained what happened to Janaki, Prakasam, Surya Rao and their mother at the end. Visalakshi's response was, "There is no real end to the history of a family. Even if we take into consideration a few generations on either side, it still remains incomplete."<sup>82</sup>

The reader's comment and the author's response are interesting for two reasons. First, the reader's comment speaks of his emotional involvement in the story, which made him want to know more about each character in the story. Secondly, the author's response reflects her views on how much a writer should tell in a story.

A brief note on offering solutions in a story is appropriate here. Ordinarily, readers look for solutions in fiction. Telugu writers I have spoken with are divided on this issue. Some writers believe that writers do have an obligation to provide solutions. Others would argue that a writer's responsibility is only to identify an issue, and present the logistics of it or a few other angles and leave it to the readers to draw their own conclusions.

*People Ahead of Their Times* is one of the most acclaimed novels in the late fifties. The novel portrays two young women and two young men, and their struggles to succeed in the new, emerging world.

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<sup>82</sup> *Marina viluvalu*. Preface, p. 3



At first, Indira is introduced as a self-willed, free spirited, unmarried young woman. She is working to support herself and her idle father. That was a newly emerging issue for many middle-class families in the sixties decade. Traditionally, parents are supposed to take care of their daughters and arrange their marriages. In this case, not only the daughter is forced to take care of her father but also to arrange her own marriage.

In the sixties, education became a nemesis for middle-class women, a double-edged sword. On one hand, she was a financial asset first to her natal family and, after marriage, to the in-law's family. On the other, arranging marriage for her became harder because of her wants and needs. Thus new kinds of conflicts started arising within the family.

Indira enjoys her freedom and that is a welcome sign. She also has her own criteria concerning her choice of bridegroom. She is looking for a "man with a strong character, a man that offers comfort, and assures her to stand by her side always". This kind of mixed thoughts is prevalent in real life even today.

During this period, a major shift in the family values took place. In the past, the individual was expected to put other's interests ahead of his or her own but the younger generation especially the educated women became entangled in a new kind of double bind. They ended up in a situation where they had to take care of the family as well as their own interests. The line between the give and take—how much of their newly found freedom they had to let go—was blurred.

This complexity is strikingly obvious in the philosophies of Indira and Kalyani. Indira is the central character around which the other three characters revolve like meteoroids. Indira enjoys the position briefly, and later, realizes that her future depends on taking necessary action herself. That is evident in her words as she put it so bluntly:

This is a cutthroat world. The big fish eat up the small fish. If I don't eat you, you'll eat me up. All human beings are the same. This is a challenging time for all of us. We all are eating out of the same fuzzy carpet. I am not looking for a life with lofty ideals. In fact, you don't either. We all want the same thing, are trying to do the same—to live a carefree life. That is what you are doing, and that is what I am doing too.

I did not make a special effort to ruin anybody's life. I know I can accomplish nothing by doing so. I am building my own house. Sometimes bricks slip and fall on the passersby. What can I do? It is not my job to watch for them. They have to watch out for themselves.

The last two sentences record the radical changes that had been taking place in our society. Up until then, the community spirit, the idea of common good had been the rule. After the achievement of independence, the focus shifted from "we" to "I". That was one significant perception on the part of the women writers of this period.

Readers may not empathize with Indira, the carefree, willful, lying, cheating and arrogant woman. However, they can easily identify the harsh realities of contemporary society she laid out for herself and by extension, for the readers.

The educated women realized for the first time that they were caught in a double bind. The following passage is a telling comment on the social conditions of the period:

If you act like a bug, you are sure to be crushed under somebody's foot. Those who want to live a life of high ideals are sure to face the same fate. This woman [Indira] has understood that very clearly. If you want to live a life of high ideals, you have to have plenty of support. With enough support, you can beat the odds no doubt.

From what I've seen, the rulers are gone but the practice of ruling is still here. Probably this stupid world has always been like that. That is why this woman has

learned to worry about only herself, and make herself comfortable by any means she can. That looks strange for people like you, people with a given set of rules.

Trust me. We all are like the sweets made of cheap ghee. We think we have wings and so we try to fly but no, we do not have wings. If you say we have them, well, I'll say, they are wet. Poverty soaked my wings and wealth soaked yours. That is why the race is the same for both of us. You are like an expensive watch, the make of a fancy company, listed at one thousand rupees in the company's catalog. I am an ordinary make. The problem is these watches do not have hands. Forget the second hand. They do not even have the hour hand. What does it matter if the mechanism inside is great? It does not matter. That is why you should learn to live smartly and live well," she said calmly.

She sounded like a scientist who has understood the secrets of the universe.

Another major development of this period was the shift in the attitudes of men and women. The two women characters, each in her own way, proves to be stronger compared to their male counterparts, Prakasam and Krishnamurti.

Among the male characters, Prakasam is the weakest and Indira loathes his weakness. She has no problem dropping him as soon as she found out that she has no use for him. He is spineless; he could not stand up to his uncle or Indira. He is constantly looking for others to solve his problems. He could not tell Kalyani that he is attracted to Indira; could not tell his uncle that he wants to marry Indira; and he could not tell Indira that he has feelings for both Indira and Kalyani. He is just incapable of expressing his feelings or making decisions.

Indira realizes that she cannot mold Prakasam according to her idea of a man. In a final bid, she coaches him to go to his village and claim his property from his uncle. He goes to the village but returns the same old self, unsure of himself and looking to Indira for guidance as usual. That is the decisive moment for Indira, a markedly debilitating experience. She is dismayed, and gives up on him. She would rather compromise her convictions and agree to marry Krishnamurti in a temple.

It sounds a little odd that "a person ahead of her times" should agree to a wedding ceremony in a temple. It is weak in terms of technique. For us, Telugu people, however compromise is a cultural value.

Like Prakasam, Krishnamurti also is portrayed as a feeble character. He is not prepared to accept any responsibilities. The only difference between the two is Krishnamurti's financial status. His wealth allows him to live a carefree life. Like Prakasam, he is also attracted to both Indira and Kalyani and he decides to marry Indira because Indira is the lesser burden of the two. This however must not be construed as a negative comment on Kalyani's character. This is about Krishnamurti and only Krishnamurti.

Like Indira, Kalyani is portrayed as a strong character. Unlike Indira, Kalyani maintains certain poise. She is not prepared to step on other's toes for any reason. All the tragedies in her life—loss of father, property, and Krishnamurti—have taught her the hardest lessons in life. She has the guts to pick herself up and move on. The speech she gives herself on her 20th birthday is poignant:

She stood in front of the mirror. The reflection of herself in the mirror said to her, "Today you have turned twenty, Kalyani! You have decided to live on your own. Let us see what you are going to do." It is as if she is challenging herself. She felt relieved and rejuvenated at heart. On that day, the same old coffee tasted a little better, the breeze blowing through the window felt cooler than usual, even the cheap mill saree and the blouse she was wearing looked more beautiful on her than ever before.

"It is okay, Kalyani! You have to be brave. There is no reason to worry. You are sure to make it in this world; why not?" she told herself, comforting herself, and continued, "You don't have to live under Vasundhara's roof. You don't have to worry about being on time and eating only when her aunt served the food. You are not a parasite. Krishnamurti need not pay your school fee. Do not be afraid, Kalyani."

The idea of a single woman living alone and making a life for herself was still new in the sixties. So also some of the incidents narrated in the story—young men and women going to the movies and the beach, women offering financial support to their families, women's education—were new and they captured readers' attention. The readers welcomed the fresh approach to the future fervently.

Another timely topic was the marriage of the educated woman. Unlike in the past, Indira and Kalyani cannot count on their families for arranging their marriages. Indira has father but the situation is reversed. Instead of him taking care of his daughter, he becomes a dependent on her. Indira points it out when she refuses to rescue him from jail.

In the case of Kalyani, her father tried but could not arrange her marriage due to the huge amount of dowry he was asked to pay. There are no discussions about Vasundhara's situation in the story. She seems to have a comfortable life. She develops some feelings for Krishnamurti but puts them away after learning that Krishnamurti decided to marry Indira. One thing is clear. Vasundhara is also thinking for herself.

Women's education played a big part in postponing the marriageable age for both men and women. However, it became a bigger problem for women. They were caught between seeking jobs in order to make use of their education on one hand, and waiting for their parents to arrange their marriages on the other. While they were waiting to get married, they would get entrenched deeper and deeper in their careers; and their income, in turn, would play a critical role in their decisions. The lives of both Indira and Kalyani turned upside down because of their education.

Very few women writers expressed their views on other women writers of their times. Lata's comment on this novel, *People Ahead of Their Times*, is one of the few I came across. Lata stated that Indira was a superb creation but the character was flawed for two reasons: first, because of her cheap talk about Kalyani; and secondly, when she feared facing Kalyani right before her wedding.<sup>83</sup>

I am inclined to disagree with this argument. Sridevi did not intend Indira to be a character of epic proportions. Indira is shown as having weaknesses from the start. She has been lying constantly, cheating, and bluffing her way out all the time. Even her own explanation at the end of her reasons for acting ruthlessly and insensitively sound like lame excuses but consistent with her character.

The story was written in the sixties. Now, after forty years, we still see educated women with earning power and without financial freedom in the real sense of the term. The women are making money and sharing family responsibilities. On the bright side, when they accept marriage proposals per parents' suggestion, women are more vocal in expressing their likes and dislikes, and stronger in their demeanor. In that sense, Sridevi succeeded in creating characters true to life.

The novel, *Son of the Soil*, supposedly depicts the collapse of zamindari families.<sup>84</sup> The rich landowners were losing their hold on the land, urban life was alluring to the villagers, and the old values were changing fast. Sambayya, who dedicated his entire life to the land, is supposed to be the main character. However, in this novel of 600 pages, a considerable

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<sup>83</sup> Lata. *Lata vyaasaalu*, pp. 49-51

<sup>84</sup> Sivasankari. Interview. *Knit India through Literature*, p. 212.

portion, pages 195-496, depicts the glamour of the city and the movie industry. Sambayya shows up a couple of times in this part of the novel but only as a father, not as a farmer.

The novel opens with a description of an average day in a farmer's life and his dreams for himself and his son, Venkatapati. Several characters are introduced to create an environment of the village politics.

Sambayya is keen on elevating his status. In his mind, that is possible if he acquires some land, and his son is married into a wealthy family. He accomplishes both—acquiring land and arranging his son's marriage with the daughter of a local landowner soon enough.

The marriage however turns out to be his biggest mistake. The daughter-in-law, Varudhini, has no intention of moving in with a family below her status. Therefore, she convinces her husband, Venkatapati, to move to the city. After that, the story is not about a crumbling zamindari family anymore. Sambayya is not a zamindar to start with, and Venkatapati has never shown any real interest in farming, either before or after his marriage. His lack of interest in farming must be blamed on Sambayya's parenting. There is no indication in the story to show that Sambayya wanted his son also to be a farmer.

The most effective elements in this novel are characterization, language, and strangely enough, not the rural but the urban setting. The glamour of the city depicted in the novel is the dominant part.

The story revolves around three characters—Sambayya, Varudhini and Venkatapati. Of the three, Sambayya, a son of the soil, remains true to his calling, stays with farming and finds himself in a position to pass it on to his grandson at the end. He has fought his entire life to keep his land. His downfall comes not from outside but from his own aspiration, his haunting desire to be recognized as a "landowner".

Sambayya has accomplished his dream, nominally though, by arranging his son's marriage with a rich landowner's daughter. Nevertheless, being a son of the soil, he never stops working on the land. Usually landowners hire farmhands but Sambayya, even after acquiring the status of landowner, continues to work on the field. At the end, he is forced to accept the changing values and he does. He allows his grandson, probably a 10 or 12-year old boy, to make his own decision. This is interesting in itself since he never allowed Venkatapati to make his own decisions, not even at the age of thirty, and certainly not in the matter of his marriage. In that sense, a change in Sambayya's mode of thinking at the end is implied. Secondly, his grandson Ravi chooses to stay in the village, rejecting an opportunity to receive higher education and enjoy the lures of the city.

Sambayya's son, Venkatapati, with no plausible goals in life, has lost everything. He is a farmer's son but he is not a farmer. He has never shown any interest in farming. And he is lured not by the attractions of the city but by his wife. He is a cardboard character from the start. At first, he is a puppet in his father's hands, and after his marriage, in his wife's hands.

Varudhini is a zamindar's daughter. She is used to a high-class lifestyle and so refuses to move in with the sons of the soil. She is in charge of her destiny. She has no qualms about sleeping with other men in order to get what she wants. Her husband, being a weakling, has no problem with her ways, or anything for that matter. The author is credited with creating an immortal character in Varudhini.

Presumably, the sixties readers responded to the portrayal of the evils of urbanization in this novel. This was and has been a huge topic for most of the writers and readers in the post-Independent Andhra Pradesh. The novel has been translated into several Indian languages and prescribed for non-detailed study in a south Indian university, I was told by

the author. As stated earlier, for most of the readers the important part has been its readability and the downside of urbanization.

Let us review two novels that are ideological in content. Unlike in the social consciousness novels, in the philosophical/reflective and/or ideological novels, poignant views of the writers dominate the storyline. The writers come out stronger and often as highly critical of the society they depicted in their works. Both Lata and Ranganayakamma present their views on the malignancies that are eating up the contemporary society powerfully.

In *Kites and Water bubbles*, the institution of prostitution is the protagonist. The novel is a series of agonizing stories and the author's perceptions of the deplorable state of prostitutes in modern day Andhra Pradesh.

The book opens with a brief description of a brothel house, run by a woman named Rajamma, in the city of Vijayawada located at the heart of Andhra Pradesh. The local police and the pillars of society are regular customers at the house.

One woman signaled to the other women indicating that a policeman was standing outside window.

"Why fear them? They are also men like any other, aren't they?" said a second woman.

This is India. In this country, men guard the chastity of women on one hand, and sell the bodies of the same women on the other, stroking their moustaches smugly.

Lata adds her caustic remarks about Rajamma, the matriarch, and her relationship to the girls under her care:

The woman's name is Rajamma. She has a husband. He claims he is selling soda and paying professional tax. She has two daughters, four nieces [brother's children] and three sister's daughters. Some of them lost their mothers and Rajamma is raising them. A few others lost their fathers and Rajamma's husband is taking care of them.

Rajamma raising the women makes sense but the next sentence that her husband is "taking care of them" explains their actual status in that house.

The narrator continues to describe the business arrangement with the women under her care:

During the first six months, they [the women] will be allowed to use the first room. The rent is five rupees per night [paid to Rajamma]. Their faces look okay as long as they are using the first room. After one year, they will be moved to the second room. By that time, their faces look worn out and their cheeks sagged. After a year and a half, they will be shifted to the third room. The rent is three quarters of one rupee, darn cheap. By the time they are in the third room, they will have lost their hair and teeth. They will waddle along with their feet apart and in pain. By the end of the second year, half of them will end up begging on the sidewalk. Half of them will be carrying a child, who will have one horrible red hole for mouth and nose.

Abominable descriptions like these filled the pages causing the middle-class moralists raise eyebrows.

Annapurna, one of the prostitutes, describes how four men subjected her to gang rape and how each one of them took turns and performed sex on her while others cheered on. After listening to the account, Parvati turns pale and asks feebly, "Is it true?" Annapurna continues to describe the satanic pleasures of her customers, and points out the irony in

their lives; prostitutes cannot reject customers afflicted with contagious diseases while the respectable women in society can.

Another woman, Suseela from Madras, points out the ubiquitous nature of prostitution. Suseela narrates the high-class sale of sex in the movie industry in Madras. Strangely, the women in Vijayawada find it fascinating. The author uses the characters to describe the heinous acts of male customers on them.

Among other characters in the story—Pantulu, who runs a shelter to save destitute women, a hypocritical writer who sleeps with the prostitutes at night and writes about them zealously the next day, and Parvati, who acts in the movies to earn money and help the shelter—reaffirm the magnitude of the problem and the miseries of the prostitutes.

The lifespan for prostitutes is short, ten years at the most. If they are not dead by then, they are thrown out. They end up on the sidewalk, begging, and suffering excruciating pain from the diseases they have contracted. None of them can speak clearly, and not one of them will be in good health. Pain and anxiety devour their faces. "Perhaps the world will not let them live in any other way," says the narrator.

The novel ends with a woman writer gathering information from the same prostitutes to write a novel by the same name. How the story within the story ends is anybody's guess. It would appear that the author found herself at a loss for an ending at this point. Does she mean the society is beyond repair?

This is not a story to which middle-class readers could relate. The book was not officially banned but there was an unwritten taboo in the middle class families. Questions such as "Is it really written by a woman," "How could a woman know such gory details about prostitution," and "How could a woman write about them,"<sup>85</sup> were raised.

In response, Lata stated that literature reflects life and "fiction has no sex". She added that she had learned about their lives because there was a brothel house located round the corner from her house, and she watched the young women suffer.

Lata comes out strong in her criticism of the society with highly charged comments. The names of her characters are meant to be sarcastic. Some of the female names she used—Sita, Savitri, and Arundhati—are mythological characters known for their chastity and devotion to their husbands. Most of the male characters are not given names at all. They are referred to by their caste or calling. Chettiar is a common name given to male children in the business community. Pantulu refers to a scholar and part of a given name, and kavi means poet. Implicitly the individuals are representative of the social groups.

Lata's portrayal of the writer as a hypocrite is probably intended to be an appeal for responsible writing. She uses the writer's wife to criticize his pretensions in a fiery language. She created the character of Madhavidevi as a genuine and sympathetic writer in contrast.

The protagonist in this novel is not one individual but the institution of prostitution itself. Presumably, the novel became popular for its shock value. I would argue that a subject of this nature is hard to swallow, but that is what it takes to make a point at times. The incidents are truthful, the characters come alive and the total effect, after one has finished reading the book, is one of distress and somberness. This is not one of those novels, which one would skim through over a cup of coffee. Lata made a powerful statement about one evil in the contemporary society and jolted the readers into serious thinking.

For Ranganayakamma caste is evil. In her novel, *Balipeetham* [Sacrificial Stone], the author illustrates the failure of inter-caste marriage, and attributes the failure to some of the irrational beliefs prevalent in the contemporary society.

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<sup>85</sup> *Gali padagalu-neeti budagalu*, preface.

The story opens with the description of a shelter where the male protagonist, Bhaskar, volunteers. His reason for volunteering originated from an experience in his childhood. He watched a sacrificial lamb being taken to a temple as an offering to the local goddess and was deeply disturbed by it.

After Bhaskar's account of volunteering, the story digresses into the story of an old man. This 40-page long narrative has no relevance to the main story.<sup>86</sup> What is relevant for our discussion is the readers' response in the sixties.

The story can easily stand on its own as a separate short story, with all the elements that capture readers' attention—greed, cheating, illicit relationships, wealth changing hands, retribution for his sins, which results in he losing everything and everyone, and remorse at the end. The novel was originally serialized in a popular magazine and was well received. The weekly installments could have conveyed the same feeling as listening to a narrative in oral tradition over several days in a temple courtyard or under a banyan tree.

The conflict between Aruna and Bhaskar arises after Aruna met Bhaskar's sister and noticed the enormous differences in their habits and language. The class distinction comes into play at this point. The Harijans have their own language and customs that are new or not acceptable to the upper classes. Aruna's uncle and aunt are instrumental in bringing up those underlying, centuries-old values in Aruna. Matters precipitate after Bhaskar left for a year for his training in Cooperation. Without his presence to remind Aruna of her commitment to their marital vows, she transforms into a different person. Portrayal of this transformation is done superbly.

Writers often draw their characters from real life. Ranganayakamma mentioned that Bhaskar's character was drawn from real life. A man approached her with the story claiming it to be his friend's at first, and later, as his own. After several years, the author found out that the man was not as altruistic as he had portrayed himself to be. He had deceived and hurt several women in real life, married two more women, and his exploitations stopped only after his death.<sup>87</sup> This is one good example of how the real life story transforms into literature.

The novel is about inter-caste marriage. The two marriages—Aruna's marriage with Bhaskar, and Vimala's marriage with James—seem to reveal deeper differences than obvious on the surface. Aruna has no problem with Bhaskar's caste at the outset. Possibly, at first, she saw only the obvious such as his education, clean clothes, polished language; he clearly internalized the norms of the high-class society. In that, he is no different from James.

However, after Aruna meets her sister-in-law, she starts seeing the fundamental differences in their lifestyles. In addition, the change in her physical condition, her improved health, may have played a key role. She is not scared of death anymore.

Let us review the family backgrounds first. James is an Anglo-Indian. He is educated and belongs partly to the ruling class, the British. His family has the sophistication on par with the high-class society in India. On the other hand, Bhaskar's family background reflects his lower class roots and their unrefined customs. Aruna is turned away by Sitamma's "dirty" habits and guileless remarks. To what extent these elements—the lifestyles, the family backgrounds, and social customs—play a role in the success or failure of their marriage? I believe several factors figure into the equation, not just the caste alone.

The expectations, aspirations and the realities of a social reformer are sensibly portrayed. The transformation of Aruna, from a desperate woman with no hope to a woman

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<sup>86</sup> Ranganayakamma. *Balipeetham*, pp. 59-99.

<sup>87</sup> Ranganayakamma. Interview. *Gamanam*, p. 15

obsessed with materialistic pleasures, and to the final acknowledgement of her mistakes, is carried well.

On the lighter side, I must mention the fiction by Bhanumati Ramakrishna and Yeddanapudi Sulochana Rani. They have always been received with the same enthusiasm as the social consciousness writers from the start. In a way, they complement and round out the history of fiction by women writers.

Bhanumati Ramakrishna has a unique style. Back in the sixties, she was the only woman writer to present the domestic humor of Telugu families in her short stories consistently. Her most famous work is the creation of a mother-in-law character, a sweet, charming, and traditional woman who is always anxious to help. However, all her well-meaning efforts go awry, and land her and her daughter-in-law in an awkward situation. At the end, all is well that ends well.

In "Kamakshi Katha", the opening line, "Kamakshi is beautiful, befitting her name" (literally, Kamakshi means a woman with longing eyes) indicates that her beauty is the crux of the problem. The male characters are shown as gullible and Kamakshi as playing upon their sympathies. The story reaches the climax when Kamakshi tells them that her husband has contracted a disease and the burden of admitting him in the hospital has fallen on her shoulders. It takes a while for the family to understand that they have been swindled of their money. This is a weak point in the story.

The milkman introduced Kamakshi to the family but he does not tell them of his suspicions about her character until after they found out themselves. His comment at the end is:

To tell the truth, Kamakshi and her husband have been playing games and swindling people of their money for quite sometime. They might have collected quite a huge amount in this manner. Probably, they are not even married.

If he is aware of Kamakshi's sleazy dealings, why did he bring her to the family in the first place? Moreover, why did he not warn them in advance? Except for this little lapse, the story reads beautifully. It includes everyday conversations to which the readers could relate.

A romance novel is characterized by a specific type of hero, heroine, plot, development and ending. Misunderstandings, mishaps and mildly seductive language are peculiar to the romance fiction. Sulochana Rani's novels meet these criteria.

In *Secretary*, Raja Sekharam (Sekharam) is a rich, handsome young man and highly influential in social circles. Jayanti is a young, beautiful middle class woman, looking for a job. Jayanti's grandmother, the only relative she has, dies in the middle of the story, leaving her at the mercy of this rich and lonely hero.

In the opening episode, Jayanti starts her new job in a local women's organization. Like all young men and women at the start of their careers, she is also hoping to meet people from the upper strata of the society, make contacts and move up. This has a familiar ring for the contemporary readers, especially youth.

The organization, in which Jayanti starts as a secretary, comprises of rich women who have no concrete goals in life and are full of pretensions. It is depicted well. Jayanti's struggle to maintain her self-esteem and her disillusionment with the activities of the organization are also illustrative of the prevalent notions about women's organizations. After Jayanti quit her job at the women's organization, Raja Sekharam offers, first a ride in his car, and later, a job in his home office. After that, all the episodes and the language are deftly crafted befitting romance fiction.



In Sulochana Rani's novels, like in any romance fiction, the language is mildly provocative, which was a cause for concern for many critics. Here are a couple of examples from her novel, *Secretary*:

Jayanti was upset and decided to jump out of the car. She reached for the door handle.

"Oh, no, no. My God! Stop," Sekharam's hand quickly moved and grabbed Jayanti's hand tightly. For a second their eyes met.

Jayanti's face turned crimson. Tears welled up in her eyes and were ready to roll down her cheeks any minute.

Sekharam's fingers tightened involuntarily on Jayanti's arm. He pulled back his hand quickly and started the engine. The car was moving slowly. The red hue from the winter evening sun was shrouding the world and making every thing look strange.

Another example from the same novel:

"Jayanti!" he shouted, held her arm and pulled her toward himself.

"Ouch." He felt a slap on his cheek. Both of them moved away quickly. The room was filled with unbearable silence. The breeze coming from outside and the light that filled the room shivered. His eyes were ponderous.

"To keep your mouth shut." Sekharam pulled her towards himself with all his might.

Jayanti's palm was about to reach his cheek one more time. Sekharam's hand seized it and held it firmly. His other hand wound around her like steel and stopped her from wiggling out of his grip.

"Pch. I am telling you, leave me alone." Before she could finish her sentence, his lips sealed hers.

His lips approached hers to stop from but ... found something sweet there and stayed there for a long time.

With this unexpected turn of events, Jayanti lost her mind. Her heart went into a shock. She was dumbfounded. By the time she recovered from the shock, she felt as if all the strength in her body was gone. She could hardly stand on her feet. A thin film of haze covered her eyes.

Jayanti was fainting in his arms and Sekharam noticed it.

"Jayanti, Jayanti ..." he shouted anxiously.

"I want to sit down," she managed to say feebly.

His lips gently touched her lips one more time and then let go.

Bhagyalakshmi, commenting on romance novels in Telugu, summarized *The Thief of Love* by Barbara Cartland, in order to point out the strong parallels between Cartland's novels and Telugu romance fiction as follows:<sup>88</sup>

All the romance novels are identical. It is obvious even from their titles ... All these writers give importance to the heroine and walk through the story from her perspective.

The heroine is usually from an ordinary family. She wears clothes, which are simple yet enhance her beauty. She is timid; looks naïve and helpless. She meets the hero under strange circumstances, and is charmed by his looks. Nevertheless, his words

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<sup>88</sup> Bhagyalakshmi, J. "Women writers and sweet dreams: Barbara Cartlands and Denise Robbins in Telugu". 8-14.

and/or actions exasperate her. She tries to stay away from him, and keeps insulting him while getting closer to him by the minute.

The hero is generous, handsome, wealthy, and knowledgeable. He understands her mistakes, anger and frustration. He pampers her as if she is a little child. He stands by her side in times of danger while other beautiful women try to entrap him because of his wealth. Many "Romeos" hang around the heroine in an attempt to capture her attention. These secondary characters cause misunderstandings between the hero and the heroine. At the end, they overcome all the obstacles, understand each other and learn that that is the ultimate goal in life.

Bhagyalakshmi further added:

Although there is no literary value in these novels [romance], we cannot ignore them totally.

The writers usually do not pay attention to the development of any other character except the hero and the heroine. ... These novels flow like a sweet dream. There is no scholarship. They seem to follow a given formula. They do serve a purpose in terms of providing entertainment though. They provide solace that is maybe temporary but not unrealistic.

In the present day society, any medium will have its influence on people, especially on youth. It is unrealistic to believe that we can lock them up [the youth] in our homes and shape them according to our own values.

These novels do not cause a mental breakdown. Readers will get tired of them eventually and stop reading them.

Possibly, they may start reading English [romance] novels, which may help them to improve their English language skills.

Two comments in this critique are noteworthy. First, regarding the literary value of romance fiction, I am not sure if it is correct to say that romance fiction has no literary value. The time-honored, Sanskrit epic, *abhijnana sakuntalam* is not any different from modern day romance fiction.

First, let us look at the storyline. The story of Sakuntala is as follows:

King Dushyanta went to the forest on a hunting trip. He saw Sakuntala, daughter of the sage Kanva, fell in love with her and married her right away. He gave her the royal signet as a mark of his love for her, and returned to the palace. He promised her that he would send a palanquin for her per royal tradition.

Durvasa, another sage, came to visit Kanva's hermitage. Sakuntala, lost in the thoughts of Dushyanta, did not see Durvasa. The sage was incensed and put a curse on her, according to which, the person she was thinking of would forget her. Sakuntala apologized. Durvasa calmed down and granted a remedial measure. The king would get back his memory of her upon seeing the signet.

Sakuntala gave birth to a son. Pining for the king, she became skinny and the signet slipped off her finger and was lost in the river.

A fish swallowed the ring, and the fish ended up in the royal kitchen. The chef gave the ring to the king, and the king's memory came back.

The king went to the forest, brought Sakuntala and their son to the palace, and they all lived happily forever.

This brief summary is enough to see its strong parallels to modern day romance fiction. The story was taken from the great epic, *Mahabharata*. In terms of descriptions, characterization, and the development of the story, the analogy is not farfetched.

During my interview with Sulochana Rani in 1982, I asked her if Denise Robbins and Barbara Cartland were her sources. Sulochana Rani responded that she was in the habit of reading all kinds of fiction; would not mention any one particular author as her inspiration.<sup>89</sup>

Bhagyalakshmi's second comment that these novels may encourage readers to read English novels, and thus help improve their language skills is a novel perception. Nevertheless, I fail to see how we can hold these parallels against romance fiction in Telugu. Personally, I believe that any fiction that has offered a new perspective for the next generation has withstood the test of time. Is it not part of the definition of literary values?

A brief note on language also is appropriate here. Unlike in the west, Telugu writers, male and female, used suggestion and metaphor extensively, following the Sanskrit literary tradition. The descriptions varied from a simple statement like "they were in bed" to long-winding, poetic and descriptive passages. For instance, a love scene in *People Ahead of Their Times* is not very different from the passages quoted above from Sulochana Rani's novel.

Indira tried to get closer to Prakasam. Prakasam now understood what was important in life. Indira spoke the truth.... said something ... each particle inside of him ... helplessness, cowardice and all the desires, which were suppressed till now, woke up inside of him suddenly. The strong desire, which was hiding under his ethics, rose to the surface. Indira saw the redness in his eyes. She turned off the light. It was already past midnight. The winter moonlight was filling the room hazily. In that semi-darkness, Prakasam noticed that Indira's youth revealed by her white saree and black blouse in minute detail. He pulled her closer. "What are you doing, Prakasam?" she said as she leaned towards him.

Next morning he opened his eyes. The soft *Kanakambaram* flowers on the bed pricked him gently.

Among women writers, Lata was considered the most daring for describing sexual perversions of men in her novels. She also used only descriptive epithets but not profane language.

Apart sexual connotations, women writers in general used colloquial language powerfully. That was one of their strong suites. General readers welcomed it with great enthusiasm but not the academy. A prominent critic, Viswanatha Reddy, stated that women writers did not have the ease of diction at their command (*Drushti*, 1998, p.73). In 1774, Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma also commented that the poverty of language in women writers was boundless.<sup>90</sup>

In the light of the extraordinary popularity Sulochana Rani and other writers of the fifties and sixties enjoyed, these comments coming from the academy appear to be biased and untenable.

In terms of structure and development of plot, the writers seemed to have stayed closer to oral tradition. In oral tradition, stories often include several layers, and the narration is not linear but concentric. Thus, from the academic perspective, we do find digression and occasional lapses in the development of plot, imperfection in characterization, and such. However, for the readers of fifties and sixties, and a good part of the seventies, it did not matter since they also grew up in the same oral tradition. The so-

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<sup>89</sup> Sulochana Rani, Y. Interview. 5 January 1983.

<sup>90</sup> Subrahmanya Sarma, Puranam. "Telugu katha: Samajika spruha." *Telugu katha: Vimarsanatmaka vyasa samputi*. 1974.

called lapses in story-writing technique did not bother the readers. They accepted the fiction with great enthusiasm.

Additionally, the women writers of the fifties departed from tradition in depicting their characters. Unlike in the past, they were not singing the praises of their heroes. Several of the stories portrayed the female characters as stronger, sensible and sensitive, and the male characters as weak and dependent on women for support and guidance.

About offering solutions in fiction: Most of the women writers of this period did not proffer solutions, which again has its positive and negative connotations. The one element that caught my attention is the use of death as an ending. There are twenty deaths in the six novels mentioned earlier and that is not counting other deaths of the characters, which are not crucial to the storyline and therefore not included in the synopses.

From what I understand, the writers saw a problem, created a character and then probably were at a loss for a closure. Possibly, the writers at some point felt a need to bring closure for each character because that was supposedly a requirement in modern short story technique. In oral tradition, the stories invariably ended with a happy note.

The fiction of the nineteen-fifties and sixties identified and illustrated the major problems of the period in a manner the readers could relate. The humor and romance novels provided a different venue and served a different purpose, realistic nonetheless.

In the face of overwhelming industrialization, return to or hanging on to the family values and rural life as depicted in the fiction of this period was a welcome relief for a majority of the readers. The diversity in themes and genres opened up a new world for them.

In some ways, the fiction brought the communities together. Readers related to the writers in ways as never before.

I shall elaborate on the cultural values and Telugu humor in the next chapter.

## 5. CULTURE AND HUMOR

### Cartoons and jokes

In the preceding chapters, I have noted that most of the women writers came from middle class families and became knowledgeable through reading classics at home. Both at home and in society, they received encouragement in their pursuit of creative writing.

By mid-seventies, the literary scene changed and reflected a blend of diverse attitudes. On one hand, the academy started conferring honorary doctoral degrees on the women writers of the fifties and sixties, and accepted them as subjects for doctoral dissertations and M. Phil. degrees. On the other, jokes and cartoons inundated the magazine pages.

Understanding jokes presupposes knowledge of the cultural nuance. For those who are not familiar with Telugu culture, this chapter may be helpful. In this chapter, I shall review some of the jokes and discuss the cultural background.

I must however admit that not all jokes are funny. At times, the joke is on the joker himself and at other times, it is simply uncanny. Here is a joke on women writers' self-aggrandizement:

A publisher: Madam, for some reason, your novel did not sell well this time.

Women writer: Of course, it would not. I told you to print my name on each page and you did not listen!<sup>91</sup>

This joke was published in a popular magazine in the early eighties. I went to the library and found out that several Telugu books, written by both male and female writers and published in the forties and fifties carried the author's name on each page. Thus, the joke appears to be on the person who authored it.

The following quip was intended to ridicule the ignorance of women writers.

A reader: Did you know that Viswanatha Satyanarayana wrote *veyipadagalu*?

Woman writer: I do not understand this. Several people asked me the same question when I said I wrote *Veeravalladu*.<sup>92</sup>

Implicit in this witticism is that the woman writer was claiming authorship of two books written by a renowned and prolific writer of our times, Viswanatha Satyanarayana.

Kalipatnam Rama Rao, a highly respected and serious writer, could not resist taking a jab at women writers. In his story, "*kuutra*" [The Scheme], the narrator describes the crooked politics and the way the politicians would create a mess to confuse the public:

On one hand, the party members were dumping questions in a torrential downpour, and on the other, the press attacked the government like bloodhounds. Talk about the editorials, it is like "the way our lady writers write serials"—the editorials swamped the papers like serial novels.<sup>93</sup>

Fiction by women writers became a common metaphor for excessive production.

P. Satyavati, a writer from the period under discussion, commented that the cartoonists had been depicting constantly women as aggressive; in the past, they had portrayed women

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<sup>91</sup> *Andhra jyoti weekly*. 16 January 1981. p. 18

<sup>92</sup> *Andhra jyoti weekly*. 1 November 1980. p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> Rama Rao, Kalipatnam. *Kathalu*. p. 238.

holding rolling pins and now portraying them holding pens.<sup>94</sup> Apparently, these objections to the ridicule of women writers by cartoonists started in the mid-seventies. However, there is no veritable evidence to prove that women quit writing for fear of ridicule. This is one of the areas open for further research.

My position is that humor, as shown in the preceding chapters, is an intrinsic part of our culture, and the cartoons did not stop women from writing and publishing in the sixties and even seventies. Some of the writers continue to write to the present.

### **Cultural nuance and familial bonding**

Frivolous jabs apart, a brief note on the cultural peculiarities and humor in our society is relevant to this discussion.

Stories dole out culture in piecemeal. Before looking for generalizations in the larger context, readers need to understand a multitude of variations that permeate a given society. For instance, the custom of arranged marriages is being played up increasingly across the world and often in a distorted fashion. In reality, there is more to it than presented in modern day fiction.

Let us first examine the extended family set up. In a given household, a family unit is comprised of aged parents, their sons and grandchildren. Some times, a daughter or a sister may be moving in with her children also, because of domestic abuse or violence at her in-law's place. They all take care of each other, commiserate with each other and rejoice in each other's happiness. A new daughter-in-law becomes an intrinsic part of the husband's family.

This is the larger context in which each individual acts and reacts in a given situation. One example of this kind of familial bonding for instance is the closeness between Prakasam and Kanakam [sister-in-law] in *Transformed Values*. The complex love-hate relationship among the family members in *The People Ahead of Their Times* is a second example of the same underlying principle. They all meddle in each other's lives simply because they are in each other's face all the time, to put it bluntly. Contiguity is a huge factor in human relationships. Familiarity may breed contempt but it also brings out other emotions like caring and sharing in people. Teasing and name-calling are as much ordinary events as jumping to one's rescue in times of need.

This spirit of family ties—a labyrinth of familial bonding—is evident in the relational terminology. The relational terminology—the forms of address people use—illuminates the generation level as well as genealogy. Within the same generation, *bava* is a cross cousin or sister's husband; *vadina* is a female cross cousin or sister-in-law. In intergenerational terms, *atta* and *attamma* can be father's sister or mother's brother's wife; *atta garu* is usually mother-in-law. Sometimes, *atta* or *attamma* also may mean mother-in-law. *ammamma* is mother's mother and *baamma* or *nayanamma* is father's mother. These relational terms are used as proper nouns in real life as well as fiction. For instance, in "*baamma ruupaayi*", all the characters, except Rama Rao, are referred to only by relational terms: *tammudu* for younger brother, *akkayya* for the older sister, *chinnakka* for the second older sister and *baamma* for grandmother and so on. Using the relational terms is a technique, which helps to draw the readers into the milieu.

The use of the relational terms is not limited to members of the family alone. Often it is extended to others such as neighbors, friends and acquaintances as well. One argument is younger people are not supposed to address older people by their given names. Second

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<sup>94</sup> "racayitrula racanalapai vimarsalu." *Andhra jyoti*. 7 January 1975. p. 8

argument is people feel comfortable enough to forge new relationships without thinking twice about it. Therefore, they draw on the relational terminology, and improvise a relationship instantaneously. When two people belonged to the same generation, *akka* or *akkayya* (sister) for a woman and *anna* or *annayya* for a man are used by the younger of the two. If one of them belonged to an earlier generation, the terms *atta*, *attayya* or *pinni* for women and *mama*, *mamayya* or *babayya* for men are used. Some times, *garu* is suffixed to the relational term to be more respectful. There is a lot that can be said in this connection, but this is sufficient to understand the intimacy prevalent in the Telugu homes and society.

The same kind of affinity or closeness is evident in the use of professional terminology for proper nouns as well. People, become friends with their doctors, lawyers and judges, and start addressing them as *dactaru* [doctor] *garu*, *laayaru* [lawyer] *garu* and *jadji* [judge] *garu*, forging courtesy and familial values into one term.

The rules of etiquette are evolved evidently from the same proximity of living in real life. We do have some rules about respecting adults, but there is also a free exchange of teasing, name-calling, pulling pranks and making fun of each other. At the end of the day, no offense is intended and none taken.

One good example is the use of second person pronoun for addressing each other between husband and wife. Telugu has two forms of second person pronoun, *meeru* for formal 'you', (which is also plural but not relevant for this discussion), and *nuvvu* for informal singular. In royal families and a few middle class families, both husband and wife use *meeru* to address each other. In lower class families and some middle class families, both husband and wife use *nuvvu* in addressing each other. In the majority of the middle class families, husband uses *nuvvu* [singular informal] to wife and the wife uses *meeru* to husband. Although *meeru* is said to be respectful, this practice however does not prevent the same two persons from exchanging witticisms, and even an occasional caustic remark or two, thus providing an additional dimension to the humor. Explaining who can say what is beyond the scope of this book. For the present, it would suffice to say that Telugu stories reveal some of these cultural traits.

In the mother-in-law stories by Bhanumati, the daughter-in-law never talks back to her mother-in-law, never says a word even remotely insulting. In "*Attaa kodaleeyam*" [A Story of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law], the author created a second daughter-in-law, *todikodalu* [daughter-in-law of *atta*'s sister], to illustrate an example of a daughters-in-law and *atta garu* teasing each other. The creation of a second daughter-in-law is intended to maintain the integrity of the two original characters, *atta garu* and *kodalu*, central to most of Bhanumati's stories.

Given below is an excerpt from the story, illustrating such teasing of the two—*atta garu* and *todikodalu*, the second daughter-in-law. Humor in the use of the pronoun, *meeru*, is not apparent in the translation but noteworthy in the Telugu original.

"Maybe you are skinny now. Were you not fat when you were a child? Is it not public knowledge?" *attagaru* said.

"That is what I am saying too. Maybe you looked like a stick then, but who can miss your big body now? The same people who laughed at me in those days are laughing at you now, are they not?" *todikodalu* said.

"Let them laugh. It is my fate that I should take this vulgarity from you."

"Nobody said anything madam. I am the one who is taking all the mockery from you. Only *you* said that my people were poor and dirty. *You* poured insults on my

family. *You* said my nose is crooked. Only *you* said my husband has taken to bad ways because of me. *You* called me garish and wicked."

Interestingly, in this fierce exchange of words, the two women maintain the protocol regarding the forms of address, *meeru* and *nuvvu*. However, the element of respect in the usage of *meeru* blurred, and it brings up a smile in the readers, who are familiar with our culture and language.

This lengthy explanation is intended to point out that most of our humor is built on the intimacy among family members. One needs to keep these peculiarities in mind in order to appreciate the Telugu stories. Probably the best way to describe Andhra humor is to draw on the analogies from contemporary American humor. The kind of humor that pervades the stand up comedy, celebrity roast and Saturday Night Live in America is ordinary everyday event in the Andhra homes. Laughter and humor are not separated from life. We laugh at ourselves, at each other, call each other names, and poke fun, all in the name of humor. Self-deprecation is not a negative concept in our culture. At the end of the day, things are not any different for throwing a few punches at each other or oneself.

### **Humor in Women's writing**

Very few women writers used humor in their fiction in the sixties.

Bhanumati Ramakrishna stands out for her unique style. She takes ordinary situations and turns them into a comic routine. In her story "Big people and little idiosyncrasies" [*pedda akaaraalu, chinna vikaaraalu*], she makes fun of the unfounded fears of small creatures entertained by ordinary people. Here is a brief description of her fear of lizards:

I am afraid of lizards even from childhood days.

Usually, those who are not afraid of lizards make fun of those who are afraid of them. You know the popular proverb, "The cat is having the time of his life while the rat is running for his life!"

I am one of those rats. ... Lizard is my enemy for life. I will not walk into a room if there is a lizard on the wall. If I have to, I will ask one of the servants to remove it first, and then slowly enter the room watching every nook and corner to make sure that it is gone. Under unavoidable circumstances, I will enter the room furtively, tiptoeing and watching its every move as if I was walking into a lion's cage. We two—the lizard and I—move around in the room in the opposite directions like two meteoroids. No matter how far I am from it, my eyes spot its presence involuntarily. Then my body moves like a robot in the opposite direction.

When I am in a group and chatting, if I see a lizard (usually my eye detects the lizard in a second), I shudder as if it is crawling straight above my head. Then, trying to hide my fear and the bitter taste in my mouth, I say to that person, whoever happens to be closest to the lizard, "there is a lizard above your head".

I expect him also to be like me, to be scared and so jump to his feet. But no. He does not budge even one half inch. He stays put, looks up and says, "Just a lizard, poor thing, most harmless creature."<sup>95</sup>

Bhanumati's best creation is the charming character of *atta garu*. As opposed to the popular image of an ill-tempered and domineering mother-in-law, her *attagaru* is a charming, naive, and traditional woman who is also a busybody. That side of her often lands her in trouble. The narrator, *kodalu*, is also traditional in that she is respectful towards her

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<sup>95</sup> Bhanumati Kathanikalu, pp. 54-55.



husband and his mother (mother-in-law), and steps in only when her services as a mediator/arbitrator are needed. She comes out as a punching bag, while enjoying a private joke of her own!

To appreciate the humor surrounding the *atta garu* character, the reader has to understand the milieu or cultural nuance. In "*Kamakshi Katha*", *atta garu* is assertive. She assures Kamakshi, "Tell him to come here. I will take care of him", and then backs off as quickly, after learning that he carries a knife with him. Her promise turns out to be an empty boast and is amusing to the reader.

Sometimes, the cultural nuance is lost in translation, especially, in the descriptions of certain customs. For instance, a practice called *madi* [touch pollution] is prevalent in south Indian Brahmin families. It may be described roughly as a temporary, quarantine-like environment for a few hours a person creates for herself or himself. She or he takes bath, wears clean clothes, washed and dried the day before, and finishes morning rituals. During that short period, the person remains within a confined area, mostly the kitchen, and avoids all physical contact with other persons and other clothing in the house.

While the *madi* is a serious matter in Hindu Brahmin families, it is not excluded from the purview of humor. Here is an account of *atta garu* eating her meal in a *madi* environment. The author uses *madi* to invoke laughter.

As is her wont, my *atta garu* sat down to eat from the banana leaf. She is facing the wall with her back to the rest of the world. No ordinary human being in this world is allowed to see what she is eating. The good Lord Narasimha will have to jump out of the wall in front of her to see what she is eating.

That is not all. We cannot even feel the tantalizing aroma of the finely roasted curry leaves. ... My *atta garu* will not let that happen. She will make sure that the aroma stayed within the steeled confines of her *madi*. The only smell she cannot control is from the pickles jar. The smells of her pickles often extend beyond the kitchen walls and into the living room.

On one occasion, my husband sat down with *atta garu* to eat. She moved the pickles jar and the smells filled the entire house like an explosive.

"Huh! What is that stench? Is it the oranges gone bad? No. Wait. The stink is awful! Maybe the maid did not clean the area after washing the dishes," my husband started yelling. Then he turned to me and continued with a grimace, "How come you did not notice it? What are you doing all day, sitting at home? Can you not take care of the cleanliness part at least?"<sup>96</sup>

I was nearly dead by the time I had finished explaining to him that he was wrong and that was not case at all.

This passage includes humor at several levels. The husband's banter should be taken contextually. In this instance, the wife does not take his comments seriously; she is not offended. This is obvious for those who are familiar with the author's style in her stories. For non-native speakers, a brief note may be necessary.

The son comparing the bad smell from his mother's pickles jar to stinking oranges is also intended to be humorous. Acceptance of this kind of reprimand and the insult as a joke can be appreciated, once again, only when the impact of the demographics is understood. As mentioned earlier, these jokes are comparable to the jokes Americans enjoy at a celebrity roast or watching a standup comic routine.

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<sup>96</sup> *Bhanumati Kathanikalu*, 66, 68

The reference to Lord Narasimha is humorous at yet another level. In Hindu mythology, the Lord Narasimha jumps out of a pillar to prove his existence to an agnostic, a demon king, Hiranyakasipa. In the story, the reference is intended to create an image of someone on the floor facing the wall and with her back turned to the rest of the world; and thus, only a person jumping out of the wall in front of her can see her food. Also, implicit is a comment on the extreme attitude of *atta garu* in observing her *madi*.

This type of humor in the form of punches at personal level found its way into literature in the jokes and cartoons in the late seventies and the eighties. Numerous cartoons ridiculing women writers appeared in weekly magazines. Even women writers made use of this type of humor in their stories, rarely though. The cartoons are a comment, not only on the status of women writers, but also vouch for the kind of sense of humor prevalent in our culture.

**Language: Idiom, nuance, play upon words, imagery and references to historical figures or events:**

Calling names is offensive in the west except when it is done by a stand up comic or at a celebrity roast. That is not the case in Andhra homes.

Bhanumati often uses this technique just to evoke laughter. In "*telivi thetala viluva*" [The Value of Cleverness], she narrates the congeniality between her husband and his childhood friend, Rao. They both address each other as fool constantly. The narrator watches them while they are chatting, and constantly addressing each other as 'you fool'. She says at the end, "I did not want to interfere between those *two fools* [italics mine], and so I just stood there, listening to them quietly". Here Bhanumati picked up the term "fool" from their conversation and used it for a punch line.

In the same story, there is another incident, where the friend's son-in-law was involved in an accident and ended up on a hospital bed. The narrator learns about the accident while having a casual conversation with Rao.

"I heard that your daughter and son-in-law have returned from America. Will he start a business here?" I asked.

Rao kept laughing as he replied, "At the moment his business is staying on bed in Vijaya Hospital".

I was shocked.

"What happened?" I asked anxiously.

"Oh, nothing. He had an accident while riding his scooter."

I became even more nervous. Scooter accident? Is he okay?

Rao continued to laugh. "Oh, nothing serious. Not much anyway, just broke his arm. That is all."

What kind of a person is he? Why is he laughing? Is it not odd!

"So, where is your daughter?" I asked.

"She is there in the hospital, right next to his bed," he said, laughing.

Of course, where else would she be? What a stupid question to ask! When the son-in-law was hurt and lay on a hospital bed, it is stupid on my part to ask where the daughter is. I asked because Rao was laughing while talking about it. I was lost. When such accidents happen it is natural to ask questions and express concern. For Rao, they all meant the same, I guess.

Later in the evening, I told my husband about the accident and he suggested that we both should go to the hospital to visit him. At the hospital again, I watched as Rao and my husband went on ranting and laughing.

I stood there pondering over the mentalities of those two friends.

With the last line, the reader understands that even the narrator thought it was odd. But by saying several times that the two friends had been laughing at each other's misfortunes and miseries, the narrator seemed to point out that it was their way of dealing with the situation.

Playing upon words is one more way of creating humor. It may or may not get the desired effect in translation. The following example however translates well.

One woman asks, "Is your husband a bookworm?"

The second woman says, "Oh, no, just a worm."

In this instance, precise translation is possible because the word 'bookworm' has the exact equivalent in Telugu, *pustakappurugu*.

Telugu writers used English words in Telugu sentences to create humor. The practice started probably in the forties when speaking English became important among the elite. I must add that, in recent times, English language has become a major part of the narrative technique in Telugu fiction. Sometimes, one third of the words in a story accounts for English, in which case, it is not humorous anymore

In general, English is considered the language of the elite and the upper classes. The practice in turn became an effective instrument to make a mockery of such usage. For instance, in the story, "*vishappurugu*" [Snake] by Malathi Nidadavolu, the English teacher was anxious to prove his love of his mother tongue, and the Telugu teacher was anxious to prove his English language skills.

"I told you. He is an irresponsible fellow," the Telugu teacher said in English, shaking his head.

"You must take severe action on him," the English teacher expressed his valuable opinion in classical Telugu.

Lata used caustic and sarcastic remarks in her writings profusely to make her point and to make the readers laugh. Sometimes it is a simple comment on the idiosyncrasies of a few people:

Among my friends, there was a commendable man who never smoked. He used to remind us every time he got an opportunity that cigarettes were bad for one's health, only bad people would smoke, and only *he* was perfect since he never smoked. Another friend of mine, who got tired of his ranting, worked on him and got him into the habit of smoking. That settled the problem once for all.<sup>97</sup>

Ranganayakamma uses wry humor to drive a point home. She often takes a sharp jab at the dated traditions and dishonesty in people.

In her well-known novel *Andhakaramlo* (In Darkness), she pokes fun at the man who showers praise on his wife for her chastity and then visits brothel houses at night for sexual gratification. The wife lives under the delusion that her chastity is the most important thing in the world. However, one day she decides to throw it to the winds and goes to a young man who is sleeping on the front porch. The narrator comments, "The young man, unaware of her impeccable chastity and unparalleled devotion to her husband, gave her immense pleasure and had the time of his life in the process!"<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Hemalata, Tanneti. *Uhagaanam*.

<sup>98</sup> Ranganayakamma. *Andhakaramlo*, p. 445

That is a powerful comment on the subjugation of women in the name of chastity. The caustic remark is sure to bring up a crafty smile and "you know what I mean" look in a Telugu woman.

Ranganayakamma is playful at times. In her story, "*Artanaadam*" (A Desperate Cry), she describes the grandmother's impending death in a lighter vein.

Given below is a conversation between the grandmother and her grandchildren, who came to visit her, since they were told she was dying. As it turned out, she was not dying after all. Then the grandchildren started to tease her.

"Gosh! Is this a game for you?"

"We can't use our vacation time anymore. Next time we will not come even if you died for real. Be nice. You might as well die now and be done with it," one of the grandchildren said tauntingly.

"What can I do, children? Lord Narayana is not yet ready to take me to his home," she said, smiling with her toothless mouth.

"May be Chitragupta lost your file. Stupid offices. This has become quite common nowadays," said another grandson, a high rank officer.

"That is not it. Grandma has performed Chitragupta ritual four or five times. Therefore, he is not going to issue orders to take her away any time soon. Let's go."

"Stop it. Don't talk like that about grandma. She is so sweet. Don't you remember she used to give us the cream behind mom's back? And the rock candy too," Radha said.

"Yes of course you will say anything to support her. Did she not have earrings made for you?"

"Grandma! It seems you have a lot of money. Are you going to distribute it to all of us or not? Tell me you are not ready to die any time soon and I'll show you my muscle," one spunky grandchild said.

"Ram! Ram! I have nothing to give, not even a broken shell. Would I lie when I am ready to die?"

"Grandma, first tell us this. Do you really want to die or not?"

"Of course, I want to. Lord Narayana has not sent for me yet. What can I do?"

Good point!

They kept teasing her for a week. After that, they packed and left.

This conversation has several layers: First, the exchange of witty remarks in an intergenerational context. This is not common but not strange either. In some families, members tease each other freely, irrespective of the difference in age. Second layer is the reference to a mythological character, Chitragupta. According to Hindu beliefs, Chitragupta is the accountant who keeps a record of the good and bad deeds of individuals and decides who should die when. The Chitragupta ritual is supposed to please him and let the person enjoy longer lifespan. I am not aware of any such ritual. Ranganayakamma may have made it up to ridicule the known rituals; or, there is a ritual and she is making a mockery of it.

Third reference is to the disappearing files in modern day offices is also a jab at something many people can relate to.

Culture-oriented references to historical figures are common in Telugu fiction. Sometimes a single instance may contain several layers. One such instance is from a short story "Shortchanging Feminism."

"So, is he a modern day Veeresalingam?" Parvati asked.

Sita smiled vaguely. "Yes and no. There is a small difference, I suppose. Veeresalingam worked to arrange marriages for child widows. And here, this man is fooling around with married women and making their husbands fools."

In this snide remark, there is a play upon the word "fool". The Telugu word *vedhava* means a jerk or an idiot and *vidhava* means widow. The two words are so close in pronunciation the joke works well in Telugu.

Secondly, there is a controversy regarding the intentions of Veeresalingam in advocating widow remarriages. While some critics argued that Veeresalingam genuinely believed in promoting widow remarriages, others argued that Veeresalingam in reality was trying to protect naïve young men from being seduced by young widows. While it is a stretch to convey all this in one quip, the simple play upon the word "vedhava" is direct.

Most of the writers did not build humor into the stories in dealing with serious subjects. However, humor is part of our everyday life. And, women writers have made use of this custom, rarely though.

The story, "Fear of Death" by Meera Subrahmanyam, describes one day in the life of a beggar, which turns out to be his last day. Death is a serious subject. Yet the tone in the story is one of sarcasm. It pulls several punches at the government, the mentalities of college students and even the beggar's wife. The Author's reference to her as a *pativrata* is a euphuism.

The reactions of the passersby to the sight of the corpse are interesting. Comparing the wife's final round of sobs to the national anthem at the end of a movie is the high watermark in the story. After declaration of independence, the movie theaters started playing national anthem as a mark of respect towards what we had achieved. In reality, nobody cared. People would leave the theater as soon as the song started to play. In both cases, that of playing the national anthem and the death of the beggar, the same lack of respect is implied.

To summarize, humor and sarcasm are built-in tools in our culture, possibly therapeutic. And it is hard to convey these connotations transculturally. One needs to strain and transpose oneself into the source environment to appreciate it I believe. It may not be easy but almost a requirement in learning about the other cultures.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The consensus regarding the achievement of women writers during the period, 1950-1975, has been that they popularized fiction and augmented readership. Their achievement, breaking into publishing industry successfully, has never been acknowledged. In fact, there has never been a systematic attempt to study their contribution to the history of fiction comprehensively.

Universities have produced dissertations on individual writers or individual works, based on a given paradigm, and based on the tools borrowed from western methodology. This explains the lukewarm critiques on women's writing produced by male scholars in the seventies and the eighties.

Otherwise stated, the women writers of the fifties and sixties developed a new form, which did not lend itself to the critical evaluation, based on the western criteria. Apparently, Telugu scholars and critics have chosen to ignore the fiction produced by women consciously for reasons only they can explain.

The women writers differed from their predecessors in their choice of genres, themes and technique. They had taken the narrative technique from oral tradition and applied to modern fiction.

For instance, in their stories, the female characters had been depicted as shrewd and pragmatic in their approach to life. Some of them were in charge of their destiny. The male characters on the other hand had been depicted as dependent on women, as guardians of dated traditions and fearful of public opinion. This is a telling departure from the inherited pattern of men's thoughts and actions, and a marked change in the perceptions of women's writings.

One of the major criticisms, leveled against the women writers has been that they are lacking in a well-rounded comprehension of the system in the larger context. I disagree with this argument. From the writers' perspective, a family unit is a part of that system and a consequential one. The women writers of the fifties and sixties succeeded in portraying in bold relief that part of the system, which contributed immensely to the greater good in its multifarious forms.

The women writers of this era were quiet and unassuming in real life, cherished traditional values, while registering their dissent in their fiction. As shown in chapters 4 and 5, they had noted distinctively their perceptions of human nature, personal relationships, and innumerable complexities at home and in the society. What is interpreted as confusion by the scholars is in reality the writers' shrewdness. It was an innovative way of synthesizing the accepted norms with the radical changes taking place in the lives of women in the new world.

Another aspect that became clear to me in this study, and needs further research, is the myths about women writers. Ordinarily, each generation draws on the contemporary beliefs and customs, makes up their stories, and creates new myths in the process.

One good example is the story of Molla. Several unverifiable stories are widespread in print and by word of mouth about the poet. It may not be possible to sift fact from fiction in her case. Additionally, new stories are sure to be written as we go along. When I saw a reference to Molla's poetry as "slokas", I could not help wondering if that was one more effort to elevate Molla to a scholarly status. Sloka is a term used to refer to the verses in Sanskrit. Molla wrote Ramayanam in pure Telugu. She had stated explicitly in her prologue

that she stayed away from the Sanskrit idiom and practice. In that context, referring to her poetry as slokas is incorrect, I believe. Similarly, the comment that Molla went to the king's court to "challenge" male scholars is untenable in my opinion. Challenging and craving to obtain the approval of male Brahmin scholars is an overlay of modern day views of scholarship on a Saivite poet, who evidently did not care for such encomiums. I would be interested to know if there was evidence to prove that the court scene had actually taken place.

In assessing the fiction by women writers of the fifties and sixties, we need to keep in mind that three factors played significant role in creating their stories. First, our oral tradition, which had a definitive set of rules in narrative technique; secondly, the women's literature as an expression of their experiences and their environment, from their own perspective. And, third, the society they had created in an environment, in which they could overcome smaller hurdles to achieve higher goals. Battula Kamakshamma is a classic example of what women could achieve by conforming to the traditional values in appearance, while maintaining their dignity and pursuing their goals. It was a ploy, and a clever one. They all had succeeded in bringing about tangible changes in our society using the method available to them.

The fifties and sixties writers walked on a double-edged sword and succeeded in maintaining the traditional family values at home while breaking into the publishing industry in the public sector. They successfully resolved their problems, both as individuals and as writers, and wrote about other issues such as human values, family values, interpersonal relationships, physical needs, and emotions.

My point is there are several unverifiable stories regarding the writers of the past. However, given the facilities we have today, it is possible and important for the researchers to undertake research, gather all the information about the writers of our immediate past and record it for posterity.

It is also important to develop appropriate tools for the fiction of this particular period, since it was unique in several ways.

As I stated at the outset, I have fewer answers and several questions. Why the women writers were ignored by the academy for so long? If their work was really lacking in discernment, why were they accepted as subjects for doctoral dissertations in the later decades? Why honorary doctorates were conferred on them? What caused this shift in the perspective of the scholars in later years? After this shift, why the inclusion of women's fiction in anthologies and assessment of their fiction in the critical works continues to be nominal?

A brief note on feminism is in order for a couple of reasons. A young feminist writer asked me, "You have had so many experiences in your life. How can you not be sympathetic to the feminist cause?"

Secondly, in the past two decades, I have been labeled first "feminist" and later "anti-feminist". Therefore, a brief note on my position on feminism is in order.

I believe the label constrains the writer's perspective and renders her work slanted. It is common knowledge that even greatest scientists, who postulate a particular theory, tend to ignore the arguments or proof contradictory to their postulation.

I am sympathetic to the women who have suffered hardships as well as all the other underdogs, regardless of gender, age, race, or any other criterion for that matter. I do not believe that I must court an ideology to be a decent human being.

One question that keeps coming to my mind is why the women writers, who have had tremendous success in the sixties, are courting these labels now. In recent times, some of the sixties' writers have proclaimed to be feminists. Abburi Chaya Devi for instance, gave an account of the proscriptions she had faced from her father in her younger days.<sup>99</sup> There is however one notable distinction, which is the reference, or lack thereof, to her creative writing. She did not say she was discouraged from writing because she was a woman.

Feminism in America originated as a political organization and writing to promote these ideals has been called feminist writing. It later extended to fiction promoting that ideology. In Andhra Pradesh, it appears to be slightly different. There is however one caveat. I live far away from the Telugu country, so, my perception may not be correct. However, to the extent I noticed, feminism in Andhra Pradesh came to be writing exclusively women's heartrending status in our society and blaming it entirely on the male population. This kind of lopsided perception hurts creativity. Additionally, it sounds hollow when the same women are able to enlist support of men in promoting their writing activities.

I must further elaborate on the creative technique, which is instrumental in appealing to the widest range of readership. As shown in chapter 4 on their craftsmanship, for a vast majority of readers, the issues and characters portrayed in the stories are the most important aspects in a story. The stories, written to promote a particular ideology, tend to portray monolithic characters as either victims or abusers. In other words, the writers run the risk of creating unrealistic characters, which fails to convince readers. Further, the ideologists tend to sermonize, which again fails to appeal to the majority of readers. In our daily lives, we see people far more complex than presented in stories promoting a single ideology.

Men in Andhra Pradesh have been supporting women's writing even in the late nineteenth century. Veeresalingam had stated clearly that his philosophy for educating women was to instill the view 'a woman's place is home' in them. He did not believe that women were equal to men. There was no ambiguity in his statement. I see no such clear-cut definition in modern day feminist writing. My personal belief is that writing fiction to promote a political agenda is different from writing creative fiction.

In short, the difference is in the writer's perception and function. It is up to the writer to choose her goals, and the audience for whom she is writing.

I believe that the world is ridden with problems that go far beyond women's issues. In that, I can safely state that I am still hanging on to the traditional values. In my mind, traditional, human values do include honesty, integrity and self-esteem, which I cherish dearly.

Those who have read my stories will know that I have dealt with a wide variety subjects, not women's issues exclusively, and certainly not to blame it on the entire male population. To me, most of the problems are arising out of the modern day self-absorption of individuals in the name of "success" and "achievement". In the past, people cared about others. Now the driving force is "I".

In order to comprehend a culture reasonably well, one must take into consideration as many angles of an issue as possible and that includes good and evil. The Telugu women writers presented their perceptions, the angles that are missing in the extant fiction. Labeling came with the academic studies. The women writers in the past did not follow the prescriptions of the academy. They were proud to be who they were. Some of them are now taking these labels, maybe because they feel insecure, or, they want to assimilate in today's literary world, which has turned out to be a business. These views are open to debate.

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<sup>99</sup> Chaya Devi, Abburi. "Failure Stories" *Andhra jyoti* 19 September 2004.



It is my sincere hope that the current and future research scholars undertake a thorough study of this subject and throw light on a better, all-encompassing history of Telugu fiction.

### **WOMEN WRITERS, 1950-1975 (Partial list)**

This is only a partial list. I may have been left out a few others inadvertently. I apologize for the omissions. Secondly, in the cases where authors are known by their pseudonyms, the original names are given in parentheses.

- 1) Anandaramam C. (b.1935)
- 2) Aravinda (Annamraju Suguna Mani) (b.1934)
- 3) Atchyutavalli I.V.S. (b.1943-2010)
- 4) Baladevi Bhattiprolu (b. 1944)
- 5) Binadevi (Balatripura Sundaramma) (b.1935)
- 6) Bhanumati Ramakrishna (b.1925)
- 7) Chaya Devi Abburi (b.1933)
- 8) Hemadevi Bomma (Bomma Rukmini Yamuna)
- 9) Hemalatha Ayyagari (b.1943)
- 10) Janaki Tamirisa
- 11) Janakibala Indraganti (b.1945)
- 12) Janakirani Turaga (b.1933)
- 13) Jayaprada Pellakuri Somireddy
- 14) Kalyanasundari Jagannath (1922-2003)
- 15) Kalyani N. (b.1946)
- 16) Kameswari D. (b.1935)
- 17) Kasiratnam Vasireddy
- 18) Kausalyadevi Koduri (Arikepudi)
- 19) Komaladevi B. (b.1935)
- 20) Krishnajyoti Sarma P. (b.1938)
- 21) Krishnakumari Nayani (b.1930)
- 22) Lalita Mandarapu (b.1933)
- 23) Lalita Vadlamani (b.1936)
- 24) Lata (Tenneti Hemalata, 1932-1998)
- 25) Malathi Nidadavolu (b.1937)
- 26) Malati Chendur (b.1929)
- 27) Manorama Surapaneni
- 28) Meenakshidevi Vedula
- 29) Meera Subrahmanyam, Tangirala (b.1945)
- 30) Parimala Someswar G. (b.1942)
- 31) Parvati Adavikolanu (b.1931)
- 32) Pavani Nirmala Prabhavati (b.1939)
- 33) Prabhavati, Vasa (b. 1945)
- 34) Pramaleela kumari R. (b.1944)
- 35) Premaleela B. (b.1934)
- 36) Rajyalakshamma Basavaraju
- 37) Rajyalakshmi Polapragada (b.1933)
- 38) Ramadevi Cherukuri
- 39) Ramadevi V. S. (b.1936-2013)
- 40) Ramalakshmi K. [Ramalakshmi Arudra] (b.1930)
- 41) Ramalakshmi Pakala (b.1942)
- 42) Ramanamma Adimadhyam (1927-1996)
- 43) Ranganayakamma (b.1938)
- 44) Sakuntala Vedula (b.1939)
- 45) Samantha Revanuri (b.1938)

- 46) Santadevi Polkampalli (b.1942)
- 47) Sarada Asokavardhan (b.1938)
- 48) Saradadevi Acanta (1922-1999)
- 49) Saraladevi P. (b. 1937)
- 50) Sarvani (Nilarambham Saradamma. b. 1928)
- 51) Satyavati P. (b. 1940)
- 52) Sitadevi Gollapudi (b. 1945)
- 53) Sitadevi Govindaraju (b. 1929)
- 54) Sitadevi Vasireddy (b. 1933-2007)
- 55) Sridevi P. (1929-1961)
- 56) Subbalakshmi Sivaraju (b.1925)
- 57) Subhadradevi Velpuru (Bhattiprolu) (b.1927)
- 58) Sulochana Madireddy (1935-1983)
- 59) Sulochana Rani Yeddanapudi (b.1940)
- 60) Sumalatha (Manda Sati sukavani . b.1943)
- 61) Suman N. S. M (b.1943)
- 62) Suryakumari Chittareddy
- 63) Tejovati Adharapurapu (b.1938)
- 64) Tulasi Chaganti (b.1937)
- 65) Usharani Bhatia (Kommuri) (b.1932)
- 66) Vacaspati (M. Padmavati) (b.1940)
- 67) Vasundhara Devi R. (b.1931)
- 68) Vasundhuradevi K. (b.1936)
- 69) Venkataramana Ganti (b.1946)
- 70) Vijayalakshmi Kavilipati (b.1931)
- 71) Vijayalakshmi Ramakrishnan (b.1934)
- 72) Vijayalakshmi Unnava (b.1928)
- 73) Visalakshi Dwivedula (b.1929)
- 74) Visalakshi Vattikonda (b.1920)
- 75) Vivekanandadevi Addepalli (1922-1998)
- 76) Yasoda Doraiswamy (b.1938)
- 77) Yasoda Reddy P. (b.1929)

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English translations of the following short stories, discussed in this book, are available on my web site, [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net), as online supplement to this book.

A Coral Chain

A Desperate cry

The Escaped Parrot

Fear of Death

A Fleck of Cloud

The Image in her Mind

Kamakshi's story

Kites and Water Bubbles

Lead Me from Darkness to Light

The Long Awaited Moment

Small Wheel

Nonfiction:

Memories and Experiences by Battula Kamakshamma

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Malathi hails from Andhra Pradesh, India, born to progressive couple, Seshamma and Jagannatha Rao.

She earned her Master's degrees in English Language and Literature, and in Library and Information Sciences. She has been writing fiction since early 1950s..

Moved to America in 1973. She taught Telugu as Second Language at University of Wisconsin-Madison, for fifteen years and was involved in Service Learning projects at a local community college for six years.

Currently she is engaged full-time in writing fiction and critical essays in Telugu and English. She started her website, [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net), as a portal for eminent Telugu fiction in English. The site is acclaimed globally as a valuable source for Telugu stories and critical articles in English.

She also runs two blogs: <http://tethulika.wordpress.com> featuring Malathi's stories and critical essays in Telugu; <http://engthulika.wordpress.com>, featuring her writings in English.

Her writings have been published in reputable journals like *Journal of South Asia Literature*, *the Toronto Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, and on reputable websites.

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