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WOMEN WRITERS IN TELUGU LITERATURE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes how traditional elements influenced Telugu women's writing from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. Encouraged by male reformers and supportive families, these writers initiated an unprecedented surge in female literary output in Telugu literature, a phenomenon seemingly unique to Andhra Pradesh. Publishers and magazines actively sought their fiction, even leading some male writers to adopt female pseudonyms. The established social norms significantly shaped the themes and styles of this emerging women's fiction in the early 1950s. Central to this cultural context are demographics, where multi-generational families and close-knit personal relationships are paramount. Daily life is characterized by intense familial interaction, reflecting the interconnectedness of individuals. These unique family values and personal dynamics, rooted in our demographics, profoundly shaped the content and perspective of the women's narratives during this period.
KEYWORDS: *Female Writers, Women's Writings, Social Reformers, Telugu Literature, Women's Fiction*

INTRODUCTION

Women have a long history of using oral tradition to create songs and stories, serving as a vital means of expressing their personal experiences and perspectives on the world around them. The female writers of the 1950s and 1960s built upon this foundation, incorporating aspects of prevailing social norms that resonated with them into their narratives. However, they moved beyond the limitations of oral tradition by focusing their fiction on societal segments previously absent from literature, offering their unique viewpoints.

In cultures like India, where oral tradition plays a significant role in education and knowledge dissemination, the short story remains a crucial literary form. Extensive collections such as the *Katha Sarit Sagaram* (Ocean of Stories) and the *Pancatantram* (The Five Strategies of Polity) exemplify this, featuring intricate layers of embedded narratives and themes. These works often employ a storytelling technique where the narrator initiates a tale, branches into subsequent stories, creating narratives within narratives, and eventually returns to conclude the initial story. Oral storytelling traditions often extend over multiple nights, allowing listeners ample time for reflection and internalizing the narrative. As the prominent fiction writer and critic Poranki Dakshinamurti observed, "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."

The story of Dudala Salamma from Quila Shapur, as documented in *Women Writing in India*, provides a contemporary illustration of storytelling within the oral tradition. This narrative highlights key characteristics: Salamma, a woman without formal education, is the narrator. Despite historical limitations in formal education for women, their traditional knowledge, understanding, and storytelling abilities remain undeniable. Her narrative reflects her bravery and strong character, revealing her active involvement in a social movement. Furthermore, the Hindu philosophical emphasis on humility and the avoidance of self-promotion, a value often associated with Indian women, is evident. This might explain the lack of biographical information about Salamma even in this twentieth-century account. For Telugu women storytellers, the act of narration was primary; recognition and reward were secondary concerns, even as late as the 1960s.

Between 1950 and 1975, understanding the success of Telugu women writers requires examining the context of their education, social standing, and historical precedents. Traditionally, Telugu women acquired knowledge at home, with scholarship evident among upper castes and later extending to other privileged groups.

Utukuri Lakshmikantamma's *Andhra Kavayitrulu* (1953) documented over two centuries of Telugu women poets, including notable figures from the 11th to 18th centuries like Leelavati and Molla. Despite their literary achievements, these women largely remained out of the public eye, often writing within the *bhakti* tradition, which emphasized self-effacement and prioritizing devotion over personal recognition. This cultural value of humility might explain Molla's self-deprecating comment, similar to male poets attributing their talent to divine inspiration.

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Upper-class women often received familial support for their education and literary pursuits. Analyzing this historical backdrop is crucial to understanding the emergence and success of women writers in the mid-20th century.

Bhaskaracharya (11th century), a notable mathematician, taught his daughter Leelavati mathematics. Leelavati authored a treatise, *Leelavati ganitamu*, 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.

A second female writer 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); and Arudra determined that Molla belonged to the 16th century. 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.

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 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."

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.* 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. 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." His wife, Rajyalakshmamma, 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.

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.

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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." 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. In her article, *naati vidushimanulu* [female scholars of that period], she wrote about several women writers and their works, including the writings of Rajyalakshmamma, Veeresalingam's wife.

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

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 severe her ties with her parents. After considerable deliberation, she decided to stay with her husband, as is appropriate for a Hindu woman.

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.

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 Rajyalakshmamma, 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.

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. Rajyalakshmamma 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. 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

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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.

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.

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.

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? 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?

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.

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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?*"

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." [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."

By the turn of the twentieth century, a few female writers like Kommuri Padmavatidevi and Kanuparti Varalakshmamma 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] 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.

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE PIONEERS IN WOMEN'S WRITING

At the risk of repetition, let me recapture briefly the biographies of the pioneers in women's writing. Kanuparti Varalakshmamma wrote a series of articles under the title, *Sarada lekhalu* [Letters of Sarada] in which she discussed several contemporary issues relevant to women, 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,

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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.

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.

CONCLUSION

Historically, education in India was primarily accessible to women in upper and middle-class families. Post-independence, the dismantling of zamindari and princely systems led to women from former ruling classes also entering the middle class. This expanding middle class developed new values influenced by the nation's evolving social and political landscape. Consequently, female writers' perspectives shifted from the earlier focus on *bhakti* (devotion) to themes of patriotism and romanticism in the first half of the 20th century. By the latter half, their writing increasingly explored their own identities. By the late 1970s, their literary contributions gained recognition from established institutions, with honorary degrees being conferred upon them. Furthermore, their works became subjects of academic study at South Indian universities for M.Phil. and doctoral research. Ultimately, the familial and social standing of these women writers, alongside the broader social conditions of the time, significantly contributed to their success in the 1950s and 1960s..

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