

Traversing through Gender Issues in Baiga Folksongs

Priyanka Singh

A feminist reading of the position of women in literature available all over the world paints the picture of a woman who is marginalized in all the spheres of life, her creative talent is limited to her fate which is nothing but merely to beget children for her husband, look after his family and household, bear all the responsibilities of her male-counterpart at the cost of her happiness and health. In fact, she is treated sometimes even more inhumanly than an animal. She is attributed with all what a man does not like to be associated with. If we look at the canvas of tribal lore and literature in light of the issues and points of discrimination or standards of western feminists, it could easily be made out that these tribal women are also a part of the bunch. The issues which form the backbone of the western feminist thought are well applicable to these tribal folksongs. Actually, the whole society is patriarchal and has been contriving in such a way as to marginalize women in all respects.

Beginning with the root of feminist thoughts and scrutinizing the Baiga socio-cultural practices along with their folk pieces in their light would make the discourse more transparent. Long back Simone de Beauvoir asserted that it is society as a whole which is responsible for women's subordination; she writes, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole which produces this creature which is described as feminine". (Simone de Beauvoir 295) Virginia Woolf unknots the social disparities that restrict women from having certain experiences that men have. She questions why women are always the centre of attraction of almost all the men; why there are innumerable books on women by men, having no degree or qualification except that they are men and not women. She asserted that a woman could be free and independent only when she stops "to be a protected sex" and "womanhood a protected occupation". (Virginia Woolf 61) Woolf gives a very heart touching and real picture of a woman:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slaves of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (Virginia Woolf 66)

In the Baiga community, it has been pointed out by the anthropologists and sociologists that women enjoy equal freedom to that of their male-counterparts; and that they are accorded sometimes even more privilege and power. There prevails, for instance, the practice of bride price: according to this practice, the parents of a Baiga girl are provided some money in lieu of her marriage and are given assurance by the boy that he will take care of all the responsibilities of their daughter. About this practice, Verrier Elwin writes, "marriage supplies one of the chief wants in Baiga life. Socially, an unmarried woman is unheard of: the spinster does not exist: there is a mere handful of widows: the unmarried man is doomed to become a *raksa* after death." (Verrier Elwin 271)

Besides this, there are other practices which also are prevalent in the Baiga society. On the occasions of Deshehra and Diwali, it has been the practice in their society that a group of boys go to the nearby villages and sing Karma songs throughout night over there. According to the tradition, the girls of the host village will receive and welcome the group of the boys and participate in the dance and sing with them. The group of boys asks questions in form of song and the other group of the girls of the host village, answers back and vice-versa. In course of the celebration, the girls and boys are given liberty to like each other, express their feeling of love. If a girl likes a boy and follows him to his home, and if the boy is unmarried, then as per their social practice he will have to marry the girl. Similarly, there are many practices prevalent in Baiga society which appears to support the women's cause. About the position of a girl in a Baiga community, the great anthropologist Verrier Elwin writes:

In Baiga society women enjoy an excellent position. Theoretically, in so patriarchal and priestly a tribe, men should be in the ascendant: actually women have great freedom and no little authority. The Baiga women may go about alone; she generally chooses her own husband and changes him at will; she may dance in public; she may take her wares to the bazar and open her own shop there; she may own property; she may drink and smoke in her husband's presence; she often eats in his company. In the Baiga *Genesis* it is not the woman who brings death into the world and all our woe; Nanga Bagin drives the nails that hold the world steady-woman stabilizes and does not shake the world. (Verrier Elwin 235)

But the folksongs of the Baigas present a different picture of the Baiga women. If we go through their folksongs, and especially from a woman's standpoint, we see that Baiga women appear to be marginalized. They work day and night to run their family, but are exploited and tortured. Physical violence is a common attribute. There is a reference of a Baiga boy asking to a Baiga girl, probably his beloved, to go with him to the field and help him in his work; and if she does not go with him, he will hit her with his axe. The boy says,

Come my girl, and help me cut this wood.
If you can't do it, I'll hit you with my axe.

(Verrier Elwin 448)

It is astonishing to note that in a Baiga society women are thought to be given certain freedom; as she can marry a boy of her choice; she can have sexual relation with any boy she likes. She can love and marry a boy of her choice. But if we zap through their literature, we notice that even in their love relationship they are physically exploited and are sexually abused. If she has to prove her feeling of love for her lover, she will have to succumb her body to him; otherwise he will think that she does not truly love him. A Baiga boy, for instance, expresses his love and asks his beloved to sleep with him and surrender her virginity and her womanly pride as a token of her love for him. The boy sings,

The Katchnar tree blossoms by mother Narbada.
O Girl, if you love me, let me sleep with you.

. (Verrier Elwin 440)

A similar example may be cited where a Baiga expresses his love and gives the impression that a girl in the Baiga society is nothing but an object of lust. Elwin tells that Baiga women are free to roam even at night which he views as freedom but if looked closely, the practice will appear the other way round. It is not the freedom of women rather a benefit and privilege for men to have their will implemented.

I am rubbing my body with arsi oil.
When will I be able to sleep with my young love?

(Verrier Elwin 442)

There is another similar reference of sexual abuse of a girl by her lover where the latter gives sexual connotation and asks her beloved to sleep with him, which shows the real picture or the other facet of the freedom given to women by the men of the community.

I have put a new bullet in my new gun.
Come on, my bed, I will put a new girl on you.

(Verrier Elwin 440)

This practice of a Baiga girl being exploited is a common one in their community because there are other references available in their folklore which gives impression that almost all the Baiga girls appear to fall the victim of the same patriarchal practice. A Baiga asserts that he is a very dignified person in his society as he has a bullock and a cart; he has also a varied and comprehensive experience of life as he has travelled all over the world, i.e. he has known and watched the society very closely. He further says that throughout his life he has never seen a girl who could claim of her virginity. He sings,

I've bullocks and a cart, but I haven't got a yoke.
I've wandered all over the world,
But I've never yet seen a virgin, O friend.

(Verrier Elwin 444)

This is the status, women of the community have, in the minds of their men, which is well reflected and found in abundance in their folklore.

Instances of domestic violence may well be observed in Baiga society. Ill treatment of wives and daughter-in-laws are very frequent. If a woman is not able to work in the field, or render her services to her in-laws, she is abused, physically tortured and sometimes is forced to leave the house and go either to her parents' house or live in the jungle. An instance may be cited in this reference where a Baiga woman is tortured and abused. She is forced to leave her house and go to the jungle. It's significant here that she does not go to her parents' house. Instead, she goes to jungle and weeps there helplessly on her fate. What is important here from a woman's point of view, as we get the impression from the said folksong, is that after her marriage, she does not and cannot have any hope of help from her parents. On being asked by her husband the cause of her shedding tears and coming to the jungle, the girl replies:

It was your mother cursed me; your father spoke so roughly.
Your young brother turned me out of the house,
That's why I went to weep in the jungle.

(Verrier Elwin 451)

Another significant practice, important from a feminist perspective, which is prevalent in the Baiga community, is the freedom that the Baiga society accords to women, like men, to marry more than once. Very often it is argued, women in tribal societies including that of the Baiga, enjoy equal freedom and are not marginalized in any sense; and the example which is given is the practice which confers women the freedom to marry again if her husband dies, or if she is a divorcee or if she falls in love with another man, she elopes with him. Actually, this practice should be assessed from a woman's perspective. It is obvious through the references available in the Baiga folksongs that in Baiga society women are abused, physically tortured, and exploited in their households. It is evident that their social position is not sound; it's unstable and they feel very insecure economically and emotionally. Their emotional insecurity and crises provokes or to some extent forces them to go with another man and leave her husband and family. Here is a very heart touching reference where a Baiga woman leaves her husband, family and her children and elopes with another man because of her emotional and social insecurity. She was not getting the proper attention of her husband and family. She states that she does not have any option left but to run with another man who promises her emotional and social security. But she is conscious of the fact that all men are alike and then she also realizes that all of them possess the same attitude towards women. She knows that she will not be given the respect and dignity which she has been longing for since the beginning. She also knows that if she elopes with another man and leaves her husband and family, she will be again forced to leave her new lover and search another who could again promise, though falsely, her security and self-respect. The Baiga lady sings:

My bed is lonely now.
 What can I do but run away.
 For this bed, I left my mother, brother and all my family.
 For this bed I left the two babies at my breast,
 And they wept after me.
 And in the end he left me.
 I will run away again, for this bed is lonely now.

(Verrier Elwin 451)

A girl in Baiga society suffers the humiliation and is disgraced if her lover or husband leaves her; and it is very frequent. It is noteworthy here that if a girl is disgraces and abandoned, it is not only a disgrace to her but it becomes a cause of disgrace and humiliation to the whole village. They sing:

The village street is deep in mud.
 The girl's chin is smeared with dirt,
 For her lover has deceived her.

(Verrier Elwin 441)

So she alone bears the responsibility of maintaining the dignity of her family and her village. The practice cuts her both the ways, on the one hand she is abandoned or emotionally hurt and on the other side she bears the allegation of defaming her family and village, she bleeds but remains unnoticed.

Another instance which needs a mention here is of an abandoned woman or a widow who chooses to stay alone without any male support will thought to be

characterless and an object in the hand of drunkard, gambler and lusty men as a *tinsa* plant has three branches and three leaves. An analogy has been drawn between the plant and an abandoned woman to show her fate. It's remarkable here that the given folksong reflects the dual nature of the Baiga society: i.e. if a woman re-marries or elopes with someone then she disgraces her family and village and if she chooses to stay alone, her character is stained.

Ye tinsa ke teen paan, tiney jakhaana re
Ye karama likhana
Raande chaadeleen ke tiney rengana re
Ye karama likhana.

(Vipin k Singh, 74)

If looked at the practices from a male viewpoint the things which would appear freedom could appear as a burden or an additional weapon to harm them if seen from a woman's viewpoint. So it becomes vital to view at the practices from both the standpoints. Few of the double standards in social practices and literature have been presented from amongst the innumerable ones to make scholars aware of the other facet of the coin.

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