

**TELUGU DALIT VOICES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION: A SAMPLE READING**

Dr. K Sandhya

*(Reader in English, Maris Stella College, Vijayawada.)***ABSTRACT**

Article Info:

Article Received 10/3/2015

Revised on: 23/4/2015

Accepted on: 27/4/2015

This paper attempts to read the themes of Dalit voices in Telugu translated into English. There are many Dalit writers in Telugu speaking domains who have expressed their anguish at the discrimination meted out to them on various grounds. Gurram Jashuva, Yendluri Sudhakar, Vemula Yellaiah, Darla Venkateswara Rao, Pydishree, Gogu Syamala, to name a few, are among many other Dalit writers whose mostly known works have been made available through versions in English. Late Sri Vegunta Mohan Prasad was the translator of some of the poems of Yendluri, Vemula and Darla. Four of the translations of Endluri: 'An Autobiography', 'A New Dream', 'Dakkali Girl' and 'Mysamma's Death'; six of Vemula - 'The Sun Fastened to a Knife,' 'Stench of Cemetery', 'Faces', 'Hard Bullock Meat'. 'A Novel Knock on the Eyes' and 'Feasts of Drum-beats', and two of Darla's poems, 'Is it an offence to be born here?' and 'In school and in the lap of mother' are going to be discussed in this paper.

Keywords: *Dalit literature, Telugu, Identity Crisis, Dalit Class*

© Copyright VEDA Publication

INTRODUCTION

Speaking at a panel discussion held at the fourth edition of the Hyderabad Literary Festival, Gogu Shyamala says,

"Many of non-Dalits look at us with sympathy. They treat Dalits like victims who are in dire need of their help and charity. However, Dalits want to carve their own identity in life style, agriculture and language. Every day, we face a cultural and ideological battle".

More or less this same sentiment has been expressed by all the writers taken up for study. The

psychic snap-shots of Dalit writers are critically studied by the critics and a common notion of identity crisis has been noticed. S. K. Limbale (2010) opines:

"Dalit writers make their personal experiences the basis of their writing. Always prominent in their writing is the idea that certain notions have to be revolted against, some values have to be rejected, and some areas of life have to be strengthened and built upon. Because Dalit writers write from a



predetermined certitude, their writing is purposive. They write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems - their writing articulates this impatience with intensity. Dalit writers are activist - artists who write while engaged in movements. They regard their literature to be a movement. Their commitment is to the Dalit and the exploited classes" (3). He further states, "Dalit writer's objective is to explain to people his own pain, problems and questions. We are educated and we know the roots of exploitation of our community. If we stay quiet, it would be crime against humanity and crime against our movement. It is our birthright to protest against inhumanity. For me and for other Dalit writers, writing is a form of rebellion. Our protest is both on the streets and on paper. My words are my weapons. For me, struggle is the paper and people are the contents. Literature is Parliament for me where I want to discuss my rights and demands, which have been neglected for thousands of years" (7).

To have a glimpse of a few poems of Yendluri Sudhakar: he is a well known poet writing in Telugu and the following poems into English translation speak out for themselves.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My autobiography was released in the palace of wonders.

Felicitations on the open stage.

As garlands fall on my neck

Wounds of yester years startle.

When flowers are showered on my head

Deep inside thorny whips flail.

As felicitations addresses are read out

Inside my intestines knives of humiliation pierce.

As incantations ring behind me

In my ears are spread the flaming cries of smoking lead.

When they sat me on the dais

I recollect the face of my grand father

Made to stand at the outskirts of the village.

When glasses full with water are put before me
Scenes of kneeling and drinking water

Touch me as hot deserts.

As a shawl is spread around my shoulders

The vague figure of my blouseless

Grandmother cuts my heart.

As silk clothes are presented to me

The coarse rags of my grand father

Hang on the clothesline of my eyes.

When I am invited to festival feasts

Nights of cast away food

In the cattle sheds come to memory.

As time prostrates at my feet

Clay feet of my shoeless great grand fathers

Move in my mind.

If my childhood teachers are seen on any road

My thumb hides itself in the fist

As a hen encountered by a hawk.

When parrot like, admirers of Rama

Appreciate my poetry in exclamations

The poetry of my race sunk in the soil

Accosts me cruelly.

When colourful cross roads waiting

Invite me with festoons

Golden swans are all too eager to

Take just five steps with me instead of *the seven*.

The dust of my forefathers' bodies

Breathes anew from their undergrounds.

When women unseen by the sun

Compete in their choice of marriage for me -

Heads struck, limbs cut flare up in me still.

When temples and the new gods

Wait patiently to pay tributes,

Temple bells laugh ironically in semi-darkness.

I have risen as a fifth sun.

Tearing the dark clouds of the four walls.

My rays of blood today

Reflect on the face of the moon.

In the light of the new sun

Time will read my autobiography

As a text book

(1993)

- Translated by 'MO'

This poem is a clear example of the hidden agony that the poet experienced in his life. His



achievements and moments of honor bounce back
the deeply imprinted bitter past.

As felicitation addresses are read out
Inside my intestines knives of humiliation pierce.

These lines depict the development of Dalits
from deprival to dignity but the wounds of the yester
years remain raw and unhealed.

He represents the voices of thousands of his
companions when he says

If my childhood teachers are seen on any road
My thumb hides itself in the fist.

In the following poem hints of leather making
sound loud. There are overt references to cobblers

A NEW DREAM

You -
Skinning the five elements,
Once nailing the sky
Once nailing the under world
Soaking skin on the Seven seas.
For you
The sun and the moon should
Become a pair of shoes !
Head lowered, may be with
Hunger or is it insult -
Making shoes with your own skin,
Grand Father!
I dream of this world
Becoming a toe strap
Kissing your greater toe

(4-10-96)

- Translated by 'MO'

In the poem 'Dakkali Girl' dalit-mat
weaving community is described. Their shelter less
nomadic life is pictured in with graphic details.

DAKKALI GIRL

Believe it or not!
Really that young Dakkali girl
Weaving a date mat
Is a Queen!
As her mother follows her like Renuka Devi,
And father with trap ropes on his shoulder,
Singing Jambu Purana, playing on the solo string,
A bunch of hounds around him -
The earth, a spinning nomadic top

Around their stomachs.
That untouchable girl
Used to move in my tender heart like a puppet.
As the girl entered our ghetto
Riding a donkey
It looked as if Jesus entered Jerusalem.
As winged white ants hovered over her like
Three crore deities
She came tugging up a rainbow to the donkey's tail.
In the whiteness of her calf eyes
Sticky moon shone like red meat.
Her smile with tartar of teeth
Was beyond all measures of beauty.
For that lass's non-Brahmin slang
Even Saraswati can't write the music key.
In childhood I used to drink
Donkey milk as well as mother's milk.
I saw my mother in the donkey the lass used to bring
along.
I felt as though a season of milk set foot in my
stomach.
Donkey Milk! Donkey Milk!! At her call
The face of our street shone like Arundhati star
Becoming braying donkeys, we gathered round.
With one look at us -
There floated the bliss of a mother breast - feeding
In the maternal eyes of that donkey.
The lass looked like a Buddhist beggar girl
Before our huts for a mouthful of rice or gruel
Of a cupful of hands.
Even the four faced God looking at her
Forehead couldn't tell
Whether her guts are crying or her lips smiling.
If only rice had eyes
Every dry particle would have cried.
The girl wriggled between
Untouchability and hunger
Like a fish in a dried up tank.
We had at least a hut for our heads
Under the roof of the sky.
The girl wandered like a nomad.
In a nation where the foul urine of cows
Becomes pious libation
The untouchable girl had faith only in the donkey.
I always think of that girl.



I talk even in sleep, giving her a morsel
 Taking it out from my own stomach.
 I dream of her being a step higher than mine.
 That Dakkali girl is not seen any more,
 Nor my childhood donkey mother!
 Both move round inside me.
 She stands at the junction of reservations
 Demanding her share.
 I hear the horn of a buffalo blowing inside me
 I see soft grains of rice as knives sharpening within
 me
 Waging a new war against my own 'higher than
 thou.'

(6. 9.1998)

- Translated by 'MO'

Dakkali: Those born of Jambavant's flank. Sub caste
 of Madiga, a fifth caste. Nomads.
 Jambu Pura: A very ancient myth, tribal in character.
 Four-faced God: Lord Brahma.

MYSAMMA'S DEATH

Our alley in the morning
 Used to shine like a silk lalchie pressed.
 She used to sweep the lanes
 With love as of bathing children.
 Her coarse blue saree
 An apron-like cloth with checks across
 A broom like the waist of a python
 A dot on the forehead like a red signal in darkness,
 Our Mysamma
 Looked like a Municipality Mother.
 Menstrual cloths, and dirty linen
 All collected
 And carried off in a push cart
 She looked like Mother Ganges
 Washing away all pollution.
 Waking up with the morning star
 I still remember the strange sound of sweeping.
 I who wasn't even as tall as
 Her broom stick can never forget our Mysamma.
 Mysamma ! Mysamma !
 I see a mother in you, Mysamma
 For cleaning my own dirt just for love
 Though not related by blood.
 Coming as yourself a gift,
 Asking for a few coins to buy a cup of tea,

At Christmas or the morning after Diwali night -
 Is a never fading memory.
 'Don't throw rubbish at door steps,' Mysamma,
 Whoever listened to your lessons of cleanliness?
 Like the cine actor's black money
 Dirt grew by the day, foul smell spread
 Through the rotten dustbin.
 I thought you had fever and so didn't come.
 Never thought you would go away leaving no trace
 Letting loads of dust remain in our unchanging lives.
 Mysamma ! Mysamma!!
 As I ride my bicycle
 Through the lane of the grave yard
 Your memory touches me like a fragrance.
 The lane that looked like a washed *dhoti*
 Now hangs its head with the crown of pollution.
 Our black dog wails at nights
 Rolling in the dust heap -
 May be remembering you.

(1985)

(An elegy to our Municipal Sweeper)

- Translated by 'MO'

All these poems are self-explicatory
 focusing on the real life pictures of the down-
 trodden.

Vemula Yellaiah is another Dalit poet whose
 poems critically depict the Dalit lives. A few of his
 poems in translation are as follows.

THE SUN FASTENED TO A KNIFE

We are the ones living below your habitation
 And we are the lighter ones
 We are the ones inhaling the stink
 Discharged by your elevated mansions
 When I was amputated
 Pounding stones to fortify your foundations,
 It was the limb that I lost
 The limb that grew into such a tall mansion
 When I collapsed, neck wounded,
 Pulling the cart of manure on an untrodden way
 When our feet suffered sores
 Carrying you in a palanquin and
 Massaging your unstrained bodies,
 Haven't you called me a buffalo?
 Haven't you termed us beggars?



We are the ones living below your habitation
 And we are the lighter ones
 How long can you keep the lids shut on our eyes?
 To open the eyes with vengeance is imminent.
 Fastening the sun to a knife,
 When we walk thunderously
 Filing my waist's knife on flint stones
 When the sickle's handle in my fist squeaks
 While chopping diagonally,
 The forest should now shudder;
 It should now produce
 The sound of an uprooting tree
 The minority caste-Hindus
 Should now step down
 At the shrieks of *chendalas*, the wretched
 Who gauged the earth
 (Telugu original: "*Poddunu Kattiki Gatti*").
 This poem brings out wide chasm between the
 laboring Dalits and the dominant affluent bossing
 over the former.

STENCH OF CEMETERY

I am the one burning dead bodies
 Thrusting down the blazing body with a stick
 Shoving the burning pyre-wood into a heap.
 I am untouchable
 I gather in my loincloth fistfuls of rice
 Left at the penultimate destiny of the body
 Only after the bier is shifted
 When I was the crow among the crows
 Awaiting the food offered to the souls of the dead
 When I was the one
 Offering a couch to the dead body
 Fastening sticks of length and breadth
 Scaling hillocks and cutting the trunks
 Chipping thorns and chopping twigs
 When I was the log burning the body into ashes,
 It's you who would
 Knock away everything, as an eagle grabs chicks
 You, the one who penned the stinking-nonsense of
 Cock and bull stories,
 In the mind's silt my body is stirred
 By the crowbars of repeated atrocities
Dvija, the twice born!

You branded me the wretched
 I set my foot in the hymn of your incantation.
 You only know the delight of incense sticks
 I would show you the burial-stink
 And the stench of the cemetery.
 Here you listen now
 I will sing with my filthy voice
 The noise of your skulls
 Even before you reach the pyre
 *Telugu original: "*Begaranni*", one belonging to a
 Dalit sub-caste whose traditional occupation is to
 burn/bury the dead bodies.

FAECES*

Carrying on the back
 A bucket, a broom and a tin tray
 My trace on the earth having been slippery
 At the site that's touched by me
 Outcast that is
 Drawing faeces from shitting-enclosures
 Washing the stink and odour of time
 In the manholes of sewers,
 I would cap the stench into a snuff-casket
 I wouldn't mind being termed a pariah
 In the lingo of your tongue
 But when I'm called the wretched caste
 It rings in my ear as a buzzing fly
 Offering a pitcher of water for washing your anus
 And shoving off heaps of shit,
 When I stretched out the tin tray for a copper
 Didn't you name me a scavenger?
 Being scolded, sporting an innocent face,
 Did I ever scorn anyone?
 Having endured the stench,
 I covered myself
 With my occupation as the quilt.
 I'm not a rogue to drag into the street
 Someone's squabbles.
 The service of the priests,
 Filling their bellies to the brim in temples
 Chanting credible hymns and the clans of devotees
 Was it of any use to anyone?
 I am the only one who's authentic
 I would plaster you with faeces



Till the roots of your caste are crumpled

*Telugu original: “*Jaathnaara*” (Excommunication)

This above poem reveals the lives of scavengers with their hidden anger at their plight. They cleanse the filth accumulated in the society!

The following poem centers round the hard –to- get –something- to –eat conditions of the oppressed Dalits who live on bullock meat to which there are many references in other Dalit writers’ works.

HARD BULLOCK MEAT

Attending to the time’s turns
Being the residue of hunger around the threshing floor
Being the hard meat of cultivation’s services
Our labour agreement the floor on which we are threshed
The bonded labour having become a yoke
Is anyway stirring on our necks!

When my skeleton keeps sentry
At the ridges of wet-fields,
The merciless thorns of the caste fence
Shredded my body
While your caste is the sunflower
At the way of your farm-shed;
Either a dry palmyra frond or a worn-out *chappal*
Beckons as a symbol of our occupation and
The trace of our house

We could outline the imprints on leather
Only when your feet moved about on our finger-tips;
My face a round black stone beneath your white feet
Folding together
The travails of hunger and
The stirring bowels of the belly,
The yield of my skin processed leather
Melting cassia
Soaking in *lande*, the trough¹
While chewing a piece of the liver

As the solid walk of your chappal
Trampled on my heart,
I am the one who could see
The generations of my ancestors
Crushed under your walk

It’s anyway known to me -

The knack of skinning by
Binding the feet of the calves of caste.
Having become the bubbling up of
Marking nuts boiled in the earthen casket of oil,
I am filing my tools, awaiting
The moment of glimpsing my full length shadow
In raw blood
The moulded path laid by *the leader*⁴
The lines in the poem cited below the pain and penury of the drum beaters.
Telugu original: “*Saanem Tunakalu*” (hardened pieces of dry bullock-meat)

FEATS OF DRUM-BEATS

I am the one who glued my palm
To the heel of your foot's thinned sole
I am the one
Who adorned your worn-out chappal
Grafting my skin

Lacing my nerves into strings of your tender feet,
When the bullock’s eyes wailed as flowers
On the straps of your *chappal* that I decked,
I joined them wailing!

My grits are the grains
Under your feet in the washing-pan⁵.
I’m the butcher sharing raw meat on the slaughtering slab
When offered an aged bullock for slaughter

I am the one who lifted first
The fathoms-deep fountain-spring
In the bucket-hoses².
Is there someone to calculate
The perforations on my palm?
My resonating drum at your ritual is
The very skin flattened with moulds and tools
Yet ... When the chisels of 'whore son' and 'widow son'
Pierce my bosom,
The scrap left in the *lande*¹ is our treatment
You, the one of caste-arrogance
The one of amorous tunes and bathing games
My drum, hanging on the peg, knows my gushing agony



I am the one
 Who picked up a rupee placed in the soil
 Tumbling myself – the belly and the brow – in the dust
 To present you amusement
 I remain untouchable in spite of the feats I perform
 This body had been mortgaged before we were born
 This wealth sank in the marsh of your caste men
 Beckoning us with waving hands,
 It's our own drum that begot tinkling flames
 Dripping tender rhythm
 The skin that we peeled the layer from with the knife
 The leather that's fastened on the frame of the dappu
 The drumsticks have changed the rhythm
 We are now stepping our feet to approach with
 The feats of the tiger

Telugu original: "Oddulu Tirukkuntu"

More or less all the above mentioned poems deal with different means of livelihood of Dalits

Darla Venkateswara Rao is one more such poet whose verse speaks out the untold anguish of the Dalits.

A poem for a sample.

IS IT AN OFFENCE TO BE BORN HERE?

English rendering: Dr J.Bheemaiah

I feel a shiver down my spine
 If any comments on my birth
 I don't know how many theories exist
 To show the birth of the universe
 But, there exists a single premise
 It is the women of my caste folk
 Who are hereditarily made
 To be their mistresses
 For the feudalists
 I am a sexual object
 I am destined
 Only to amuse their heart
 I am a prey to their sexual thirst
 I have been crushed as Mathangi for centuries
 About their birth
 The *puranas* are piously recited
 I too feel like dragging *pochamma* or *poleramma*

Onto the *racchabanda*
 To grill them to declare
 To whom I was born, and
 Who was born of me through whom.
 For one thing I am in doubt:
 Except those born of the feet of the gentry
 Will not those gods taste the 'youth' of others?

There are many such powerful poems available in English translation. They divulge the pent up emotions of Dalits who revolt against their oppressors seeking justice and dignity. This kind of discrimination is witnessed all around the globe in different forms but in degrees different. It is bounden duty of all citizens to march forward to usher in a just and equal community striving towards nobler motives resulting in total peace and harmony and general welfare ultimately.

REFERENCES

- [1] Three Telugu poets in translation: Yendluri Sudhakar, Vemula Yellaiah, Darla Venkateswara Rao *A Bilingual Anthology of Poems* 1985-2002. Secunderabad: JJ Publications. © Hemalatha 2002
- [2] <http://www.generallyaboutbooks.com/2013/05/dalit-literature-dalit-writer.htm>
- [3] Conversation with Sharankumar Limbale by Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi *Am I an upper caste or an untouchable?* <http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=15011#sthash.kaLySUSo.dpuf>