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**FOLKSONGS AS THE SANCTUARY OF PASSIONATE MEMORIES IN
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF VIRAMMA**



Vani Devi V
HSST English
Gmhss Chamakkala
Trissur District, Kerala



Shamna R
Assistant Professor
PG Department of English
PSMO College
Tirurangadi Malappuram
676306 Kerala, India
Email : shamnavahid@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Few aspects of human culture can claim to be so old and as universal as music. Being present in all the human societies from very ancient times, music has unfolded in diverse forms. When the language was not much developed in the earlier stages of society, man relied upon vocal tunes to communicate with supernatural powers to supplicate for his prosperity and protection from evils. With the gradual emergence of the trend of singing 'worded songs', this powerful medium became more effective, to exploit its non-ritualistic aspect to express different human feelings. Though the relationship between the members of a community or a group is based mostly on their necessities, the superstructures of religion, philosophy and literature also penetrate deep into the reality of their social situation. Therefore, the cultural traits in their rich folk heritage can be discerned mostly in their folksongs and rhymes. Through the narration of folktales, folk songs and the knowledge of religious rituals which are prevalent in the village of Karani, the Tamil Dalit writer Viramma in her autobiography, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, asserts her wilful acceptance of her heritage and culture that shape the philosophy of her life that can help her to know and operate in the world.

KEYWORDS

Folksongs, Folktales, rituals, Village of Karani, Viramma

RESEARCH PAPER

Few aspects of human culture can claim to be so old and as universal as music. Being present in all the human societies from very ancient times, music has unfolded in diverse forms. When the language was not much developed in the earlier stages of society, man relied upon vocal tunes to communicate with supernatural powers to supplicate for his prosperity and protection from evils. With the gradual emergence of the trend of singing 'worded songs', this powerful medium became more effective, to exploit its non-ritualistic aspect to express different human feelings. Any sort of singing is considered as a manifestation of finer aspects of human life, and hence it became universal in human society. In some places words of songs are of little importance and seen to be used primarily as support for the music. In most other parts of the world, drums and rattles, beating time by hands or feet or the stroking of a harp give strong rhythmic effect to folk singing.

Though the relationship between the members of a community or a group is based mostly on their necessities, the superstructures of religion, philosophy and literature also penetrate deep into the reality of their social situation. Therefore, the cultural traits in their rich folk heritage can be discerned mostly in their folksongs and rhymes. As a matter of fact, in many places these songs are of great importance and sung at social functions and harvest festivals, while in certain regions, the songs are used to infatuate the hearts of lovers to serve as a part of religious ceremonies and secular rites. They also depict past exploits of the heroes. Through them, the group also lightens the communal labour. In some preliterate groups, the songs are used as recital of incantations to invoke blessings from the supernatural powers. It might be sung to the magical effects to cure illness or to thwart enemies.

Folksongs are generally sung for the pleasure of singing or listening. They are "the live human documents that reflect actual historical processes and phenomena of different ages", says the famous folklorist Kishore Jadav. Folk songs are divided into two, lyrical and narrative. The latter are called ballads. The comparative importance of these types varies in oral literature of different people. People across the world use them for expressions of commonly shared ideas or feelings, which are often trivial or may be profoundly moving. Cecil J. Sharp, the great collector of English folksongs, defines folksongs "as the song created by the common people" (20), contradistinguishing it from the song popular or otherwise, which has been composed by the educated. Poems and songs often give us clearer insight, but the poetry of those unlettered and unsophisticated offer certain important clues to their philosophy of life. It is intended here to examine the folk songs prevalent in the village of Karani, as is exemplified in Viramma's autobiography, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*. The back flap of the book says that Viramma is a grandmother, an agricultural labourer and a dalit. But in the actual narration it turns out that she is a bit more. She is the most prolific singer of the village, a trained midwife, a knower of spells, and is a supervisor of other contract labourers in her landlord's field. Since she is a folk artist, she has a holistic vision of her worlds, its constitutiveness and has

an idea about its historical roots. The sensitive artistic mind of hers has a very sharp memory and she can recall even the smallest events of her life in a great detail. Her vibrant interest in other human beings, be they itinerant singers, eunuchs or snake catcher tribes, makes her a good social being, and human being. Her taste for songs, stories and street theatre, the abundance of detailed observation she is able to provide on rituals and ceremonies or on the exact type of food being prepared for social occasions, show a lively curiosity about all facets of life—the social, economic, political and religious.

In the preface of the autobiography, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, Will Hobson, the translator of this book remarks, “Viramma’s knowledge of popular songs and tenants made her a valuable source for Josaine Racine’s ethnomusicological research” (vii). A community whether agricultural or otherwise, expresses itself passionately and imaginatively through its folk songs. It lays down maxims and constitutes instruments to control the society, provides ideal to be inculcated amongst its members for individual’s wellbeing as well as general welfare of the society. In Karani, folk songs are of great importance and sung at important juncture of various rituals ranging from harvest festivals to marriages, attainment of puberty, births and deaths. It seems to be more alive and in great vogue than the folk tale. Viramma knows a variety of folk songs. Repetition and vocal interpolations are the traits typical to these folksongs. The music and words of the folk songs are closely interwoven. Viramma finds it difficult to recite a song without a proper tone. When asked to do so she often forgets portions even of her favourite songs and she has to repeat with melody to recapture the words. In *Folklore of Tamil Nadu* Lekshman Chettiyar opines, “Tamil folk music is remarkable for the *tala* intricacies” (47). Even in her talk, Viramma produces certain rhythmic sounds to denote the meaning of the words. [*Pada, pada* to denote the beat of drum and *kola, kola, kola* for burning sound of fire]. It shows the influence of music in her life. Her memory of past is filled with the numerous rhythms of folksongs.

The folk songs, covering the journey of folk life beginning from the cradle and ending with the funeral connote the spontaneous outburst of feelings, love, imagination, sentiments of the ancestors, morals, and disciplines. In her early days, girls got married before they attain puberty. Consequently, she was unaware of the sexual play, which she is going to do with her husband. When a girl reaches puberty, she is supposed to be in her confinement for eleven days. In the evenings, a group of young and old women come and sings ‘fanny rude songs’. Even now, it is common in puberty rituals. One such song is quoted here:

Oh sweet little one, you’ve had your first period?

When did you have it little girl?

Tell me what you’re feeling?

Don’t be ashamed as you find out

Girl, now you have reached puberty

[.]

That’s how he’ll make you pregnant

And the child will come out by the same hole

All will hurt your pretty fanny, O sweet little one. (Viramma 33)

By the singing, they teach the girl child about sex and tell how the husband would 'use' her body. Here the folk songs act as the medium for the expression of ideas or emotions. The songs give the girl a clearer insight than the lengthiest discussions on sex. The songs connected with marriage are very numerous and have great variety. When the bride is received by the in-laws, women sing songs of welcome. Songs referring to the ceremony are sung. Each line of song describes the jewels, dress, tali and pottu of the bride. Steps involved in the marriage ceremony from the beginning to the end are also described in these songs. The bride is compared to the beautiful lotus on the chariot of her husband:

Oh young girl without match
He's received you himself
Beautiful as you are I your jewels
He has given you a garland of purple mountain-
Ebony and jasmine
He's bathed you
With rosewater, sandal and musk
[.....]
He has put a *pottu* on your forehead
He has put on your diadem
He has knotted your gold tali
For you, the lotus on his chariot. (*ibid* 25)

Though the folksongs sometimes being predominantly religious, most bear traces of other aspects discussed at length. Work song is one such part of these aspects. Even some of them connected with the festivals are devotional in content. For example, during the festivals of Mariamma, four young boys are disguised as girls to collect everyone's share. Dressed like tribal women the boys dance continuously holding a beautiful margosa branch. Often person with drum in his hand sings:

In this house, good fortune will be born!
Give what you should to Mariatta!
We are going to make the gruel for Mariatta!
The measures of grain hidden away,
You should give them to us! (*ibid* 109)

A good portion of folksongs relate to agriculture. During harvesting, transplanting or even sowing and ploughing songs are sung. In such songs, there is invariably repeated prayer to the Lord for a good harvest. These songs are not always about mythical or pseudo-historical persons; they often deal with the realistic events in the lives of ordinary people. When the fields are ready, women go and plant out the paddy and the

men plough the fields, sow, irrigate and uproot. Women start singing on the way to the paddy field. Some laments are sung for the old women who accompanied them to the field. Viramma remarks, “We have got to endure the pain in our legs and arms when we have had to plant out one or two kani in the hot sun, our stomachs are hollowed out by hunger: We endure it by singing” (*ibid* 244). Lamentations, planting out songs, *sunnambu* songs are sung in unison. *Sunnambu* songs are those sung by women working in limekilns. In the past, there were irrigation songs. The process went like this. Two guys stood in the opposite poles and poured out a big water kin from the well when the pole swag back up. The men always sang when they worked the shaft-well to co-ordinate their movements:

Let Pillaiyar come!

Let Perumal come!

Let Siva come!

Let Siva and Permal come together

O Omavalli, I haven't seen you for long time!

Muttamma and I, we left for Patnam

Give me a kiss O woman, a kiss

And most of all give me your nipples! (*ibid* 245)

The first stanza is the prayer to the lord to have a rich harvest and the song invokes Perumal, Periyandavan and his son Pillaiyar. The second stanza deals with the theme of love and sex in which a passionate man finds out his sweet hearts after a long time and invites them to have sex. Love and sex are inexhaustible themes in Tamil folk songs. They combine love and bhakti in these songs. Mere singing of the songs seems to be more important to them than the lexiconic meanings of the words. Through the music of the song, the group lightens the burden of their labour. Here the music is born out of free vein of human sensibilities unlike its modern trend based on conscious systematization and codification with a view to reading an impersonal transcendental world of aesthetics.

Lamentations or death songs are popular among the people in Karani. Women belonging to pariah community are considered as the best weepers. Everyone knows each other in the village and when a person dies, they sing, cry and tell beautiful stories about the dead. Women, who do not know, will learn crying songs two lines at a time while hearing more experienced women cry in the clusters that forms the funerals. What is needed first for crying out at funerals is genuine emotion. Death songs are said to praise the dead. The singer essentially gives a synoptic and superlative account of the individual's lifetime public achievements. Here is a lamenting song sung at the funerals. Usually the songs of lament start with the story of crow:

Ayo, the crow has not flown for me!

Those who saw it told me nothing about it!

Ayo! The eagle has not flown for me!

Those who saw it told me nothing about it. (*ibid* 135)

According to their myth, crows always bring bad news. When a crow runs in front of the house more than once, a visitor will come. But if a crow comes and caws on the roof or if we are witnessing two crows kissing, it is considered as a bad sign. It means the women of the house will cry, so someone will die soon. As the bearers of bad news, crows are always mentioned at the beginning. People like death songs because they find them tragic. "People like to hear sad stories, especially in this context. Mourners empathize with the character's trials and sufferings, for they too are unable to prevent the loss of their husbands, wives and children, and they too anguish in grief" (Clark 34).

The songs are the cosmetics of the melam (troupe or musicians with drums). The drums have the power to gather up people. The first round of the drumbeats is an assault on the auditory. People, in turn follow the beats, and by the second round of drumming neighbours flock to the house of the morning family. When the singer steps forward, a joyful excitement seizes the assembly of man and youngsters. As he draws out the last words of singing with exaggerated emphasis, the drums resound like a chorus. Everyone drinks at funerals, from the leader to the musicians. It is the rhythm and alcohol that inspires the musicians:

Mother had a dwarf birch tree
A tree where the cuckoo came to nest!
If someone should cut off its branches
Where would our cuckoo rest! (Viramma 138)

The sublime unity of man with nature is splendidly reflected in their folk songs even while expressing their grieves and sorrows. Nature is represented in these songs through the powerful imagery of crow, cuckoo, tree etc.

Songs related to tales sung by launders are generally of a narrative character. Most of the songs belonging to this group are ballads. It can be defined as "A simple narrative song of known or unknown origin that tells a story with stress on the critical situation, by letting the action unfold itself in event and speech with little comment or intrusion of personal bias" (45). Yet it is not always easy to distinguish a ballad from an ordinary folk song. This is shown by their themes, their technique of telling the story, and external form. Generally, they relate stories, which seem to be based on tales. For example, Songs in the story of *Brother Crocodile* delineates the affinity between the human race and the bird-animal world. It also expresses the innermost human feelings and emotions.

The narrative songs are laden with profound philosophical meanings and possess high literary quality. One song is sung in the story of the Lovers of Manjakkuppam, which explores an extramarital amorous relationship of a man and a married woman and her husband's suspicion about the chastity of his wife. The song is given below:

O the rustling hyacinth beans
O the husband, o the prince

He has come, he is inside

Aararo, aro, aararo, aro

He keeps watch on the palace. (*Viramma* 207)

Actually, it is a message to the lover who waits for her in the garden under the arbour of hyacinth beans (206). Finding the baby's crying as an excuse the woman tells her husband that she is going to the garden to make the child sleep. She passes the message in the form of a lullaby. Anyhow, the autobiography of Viramma is heavily documented with descriptions and rituals of exorcism, vivid details of daily life, festivals and ceremonies, and hence from an anthropological perspective or ethnological perspective, it offers a wealth of material.

In short, each group of people has handled its folksongs in its own way, and neither its origin nor its evolution can be explicitly spoken of. The most obvious characteristic of folk songs is that it is oral. The continued existence of them depends upon memory. It thus happens in nearly all cultures; certain people specialize in remembering and repeating what they hear. The expert folksingers like Viramma possess prodigious memories and from time to time, with slight variations, they pass on hundreds of songs and tradition that they heard long ago to new generations.

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