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Re-imagining Keats: A Reading of D.V.Gundappa's '*Belur's Sculpture Girls'*.

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Abstract- John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820) in its exalted tone locates aesthetic experience in the perception and appreciation of a piece of art .The powerful visual image 'urn', a sylvan historian not only has invited several interpretations but also has found its 'transformation' in *Kannada* literature. A 1924 ode '*Belur's Sculpture Girls'* by D.V.Gundappa,a popular kannada poet, critic and philosopher was inspired by Keats's aesthetic experience in '*Ode on* a *Grecian Urn'*. The poet himself acknowledges his indebtedness to Keats in a submissive tone. The paper is a reading of '*Belur's Sculpture Girls'* to understand the complex processes of intercultural transfer. Critics like G.S.Fraser have identified Mathew Arnold's '*The Scholar Gypsy'* (1853) and '*Thyrsis'* (1865) as a 'tribute of formal imitation' paid to Keats. But the transgressions that Arnold's texts achieve are different from D.V.Gundappa's text. The paper attempts to identify the differences to deepen the understanding of the historical location of the text and seeks to understand the nuances of such transformation in the choice of visual images and the use of local traditions. The paper draws insights from Harold De Campos's notion of transceation as radical translation praxis to shed light on the text in question. This paper thus is an attempt to look at D.V.Gundappa's ode (not as imitation) as an act of creative re-imagination and identify its relation with the local tradition.

Key words: Aesthetic Experience, Inter-cultural Transfer, Transgression, Translation, Re-imagination.

Introduction-The early 20th century Kannada literature is notable for its access to the 'Realms of Gold' (to use Keats's expression) of world literature.The literary experiments of creative minds of that era exhibit a rare negotiation with the local traditions and external influences. The paper chooses D.V.Gundappa's *Belurina Shilabalikeyaru* (*Belur's Sculpture Girls*) for a closer examination of the process. The poet acknowledges Keats as his source of inspiration and allows the researcher to eavesdrop the interaction between great minds that live in different realms in terms of space, time, culture and power. The paper will first situate Keats in 20th century critical scene in England and America and then introduce the reader to D.V.Gundappa's transceation of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and attempts to account for the same using *Belur's Temple* , a companion text to the poem. The paper aims at analyzing the process of complex intercultural transfer involved in such creative endeavors.

Most Romantic poets endured a painful critical 'ridicule' and 'scoffing' in the inaugural moments of English Romanticism. Keats was no exception. Keats, 'a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished' (Shelley) did not live long to enjoy his popularity. He was condemned as an ignorant cockney upstart who was 'more unintelligible and ten times more tiresome and absurd than his prototype' (Croker 266).However one can safely say that gradually the critical perception of Keats in particular and Romantic poets in general improved in the 1850's. For instance, Mathew Arnold acknowledged him as an 'exquisite genius' in 1853 whose 'pathetic death rendered him forever interesting'. However this popularity did not last long. In the 1930's T.S.Eliot and F.R. Leavis used 'Keats as a stick to beat Shelley' (Moore and Strachan 273).and T.E.Hulme raises his objection even to the 'best of Romantics', to what he perceives as their 'sloppiness', 'whining' and 'moaning'.

But in *Kannada* literary context, the situation was quite the opposite. Romantic poets enjoyed a warm reception from most of the *Kannada p*oets of that time and seemed quite oblivious to the critical scene in England and America. This paper is a reading of one such sojourn of Keats in *D.V.Gundappa's* ode *Belur's Sculpture Girls*. *D.V. Gundappa* (1887-1975) is a well-known poet, biographer, and cultural critic of *Kannada* literature. His notable works include *Mankuthimmana Kagga* (translated as *Foggy Fool's Farrago* by Malathi Rangaswamy and Hari Ravi kumar*), Baligondu Nambike* (translated as *A Faith for Life* by Haricharan S.M), *Vasantha kusumanjali*, and *Nivedhana*.

The poem '*Belurina Shilabalikeyaru'* is one of the poems in the collection '*Nivedhana'* (1924). In the foreword, D.V.Gundappa notes that the poems are an attempt to compile his experiences on seeing man-made or natural structures that have become popular due to their visual appeal and scenic beauty. D.V.Gundappa notes that '*Belurina Shilabalikeyaru*' brought to his mind Keatsian aesthetic appreciation in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and few lines are a '*prasada*' of that great poet. A post colonial perspective would foreground the asymmetric power relations that these two literary worlds share and argue for a victimhood of local literary culture. But this may not help us understand the 'transcreational mode' of literary experiments and risks the danger of oversimplification.

In this context Harold de Campos's observation that "while Submission may be a form of behavior, 'transgression becomes the form of expression" (Vieira102) provides a new perspective. The chosen ode would help us to understand the various ways in which poets made links with local traditions, and attempted 'transgressions'.

Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819) has intrigued several critics. The mesmerized speaker in the ode tries to interpret the art depicted on the urn. He calls the urn a 'foster child' and 'a sylvan historian' and tries to understand the scenes depicted on the urn like lover's mad pursuit

for his beloved, villagers heading for a sacrifice etc. The closing lines of the ode declare 'Beauty is truth and Truth Beauty'-That is all/ye know on earth , and all ye need to know, which is generally understood as a message of the poem. This ode is read as an attempt to 'depict an act of interpretation' and the urn gradually 'receding into an aesthetic form' and carrying a debatable message.(Sheats311),a message that 'teased critics out of thought than into it'(whitley126) and the ode is also seen as a lesson on how to read poetry , in particular 'Romantic poems' (Cronin257).

D.V.Gundappa's ode 'Belur's Sculpture Girls' is also an act of interpretation and aesthetic appreciation. If Keats admires the enigmatic and fascinating beauty of a 'Grecian Urn' which represents the perceived superiority of Greek culture, D.V.Gundappa admires Belur's sculpture, which represents his own native culture. Keats adoration of Greek culture as 'the realms of Gold' in his poem 'On first looking into Chapman's Homer' as opposed to his own 'Western Islands' throws light on questions of culture and power.J.G.Lockhart, his unsympathetic critic mocked Keats for regarding Greeks as the most tasteful people and questioned the authenticity of his experience due to his lack of direct experience of Greek Art. Lockhart also stated that Keats knew Greek culture only through George Chapman's translation of Homer into English. (Cronin, 268).

Lockhart's view may seem irrelevant to a modern reader due its emphasis on authenticity of experience and rejection of literary realm and translation as a reliable access to culture. But one cannot discredit the question of power and culture that it foregrounds due to the choice of Grecian Urn to represent aesthetic form. On the contrary D.V.Gundappa chooses to admire 'Belur's Sculptures', a native cultural heritage. It is significant to note that in the 1920's most creative writers of *Kannada* were striving to popularize the notion of unified Karnataka based on language and culture. They endeavored to revisit the past and awaken the *Kannada* consciousness. D.V.Gundappa might have been inspired by Keats but the symbols and images were modified to serve the local needs.

In an essay '*Belur Temple'*, a companion text to the ode he suggests that temples served as a space for recreational, religious and social activities. And hence, temples have sculptures that depict everyday life and beauty. And to interpret these sculpture texts, according to D.V.Gundappa is to flip through the pages of an 'Internal History'.

The poem begins with an interpretive translation of Keats's lines in 'An Ode on a Grecian Urn'.

Consider D.V.Gundappa's re-imagining of the same:

Melody that does not reach out to the ear/Pleasure that cannot be experienced, is indeed equal to Divine nectar, Amrita/Eyes, without batting the lids delights in seeing you, Wondering who these damsels are.... (Translated by research scholar)

In both the poems speaker indulges in conversation with the piece of art and in the act of reading. For Keats, it is a moment of re-discovery of Greek culture and an attempt to decipher the meaning of a remote and exotic culture but for D.V.Gundappa the sculpture is a reminder of his own spiritual, religious and aesthetic culture. That seems to encapsulate an aspect of Hindu philosophy of 'Chidananda' or the 'eternal bliss'.

Women depicted on Keats's urn are passive, waiting to be loved and urn itself is an unravished bride of quietness where as women that D.V.Gundappa comes across in sculptural form are aware of their sensuality and beauty. For instance, He comes across a woman looking into mirror and getting carried away by her own beauty, the other woman applying scented oil to her hair, the next one wearing a necklace, women engrossed in music,dance,hunting etc. The speaker wants to know if the woman looking into mirror is expecting the arrival of her lover. Many scholars have argued that Keats's imagination of a 'flowery tale' around the urn is his own imagination based on his reading of Greek culture. Thus Keats's hesitation to provide agency to the woman in 'the mad pursuit' and 'the wild ecstasy' provides a different dimension to the ode. In Richard Cronin's reading of the text, the first scene on the urn seems to suggest a group rape and the observer seems to feel an excitement from his imaginative participation.

On the contrary, D.V.Gundappa's ode, there is an attempt to recognize 'Sringara' or the erotic component of human emotions. In the companion text to the ode, D.V.Gundappa notes,

'The basic aspect of the world is Brahma or Eshwara and its characteristic is eternal bliss and it manifests in nature. And experiencing the nature is itself beauty and when it manifests in the attraction between man and woman-the erotic love (Sringara) is born' (Gundappa 11).

Belur sculpture art itself celebrates the erotic love and sensuality. The ode conceptualizes the same idea in the word form but prescribes them the duty of serving the God. In lines 49-52, the speaker in the ode declares that their beauty would remind the travelers of life the miracle of God and by showcasing their beauty they would ease the path of culture and that itself is the service to God. Dr.Anantha Narayana rightly points out that although the technique of narration used in D.V.Gundappa's and Keats's ode the conceptualization of beauty follows the Bhakti Tradition of 16th and 17th century. Interestingly the poems in 'Sri Chennakeshava Anthahpurageethe' are set to music as in *Dasa* Literature. D.V.Gundappa in this ode follows the examples of Purandara Dasa and Thyagaraja in the choice of diction and world view.

Keats's ode which concludes with 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'-that is all ye know on earth' underlines the impossibility of deciphering the world. Keats in a letter to his brothers George and Tom (1817) articulates the 'the intense pleasure of not knowing' and of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any reaching after fact and reason' (Moore and Strachan 153).Thus the knowledge we have about truth and beauty is limited and uncertain to Keats. There is little scope for ambiguity in D.V.Gundappa's conceptualization of truth and beauty in 'Belur's sculpture Girls'.

When Mathew Arnold re-imagines Keats's odes in his 'The scholar Gypsy' and 'Thyrsis' ,Fraser notes that Keats's sense of 'transience' is substituted by the more local Victorian sense of the constant worry, hurry and push of historical change. On the other hand D.V.Gundappa explores a spiritual dimension by connecting it with the 16th and 17th century world view and thus substitutes Keatsian 'intuition of the eternal in nature, art and myth' (Fraser 14).

The reading of the text has helped the researcher understand the nuances of an 'Intercultural transfer' which could be called 'Transcreation' .In Harold de Campos, a Brazilian translators' words 'transcreation is not to try to reproduce the original's form … but to use the local existing tradition' (Vieira 109).The process involves making choices in terms of symbols, artefacts, diction and philosophical notions to serve the local cultural needs.

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