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STUDY ON RETELLING AS A METHOD OF INTRODUCING AMERICAN PROGRESSIVE WRITERS AND THEIR WORKS TO TELUGU READERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns itself to the novel *Freedom Road* (1944) that depicts the situation after the culmination of chattel slavery in America on January 1, 1863. Chattel slavery involved the purchase and sale of African American slaves. The practice was institutionalized in America since the sixteenth century. The settlers in America included The Dutch, The French, The Spanish and The Portuguese. They were controlled by the British and wanted to liberate themselves during The American Revolution of 1775. They promised that the African slaves brought along would be liberated after the Revolutionary War or American War of Independence(1775-1783). This promise was not kept up even after 80 years. The African slaves suffered deep anguish for they were being purchased and sold like chattels of an owner. The anguish of the chattel slaves finally resulted in The American Civil War (1861-65). This novel by Howard Fast represents the situation of America in the year 1868. He worked for the Communist Party in America. He was imprisoned. During the imprisonment he planned that he would author a work that portrays the conditions of the working class or the former slaves. He had seen the African slaves in the state of South Carolina. He decided to author an account of the working conditions of the emancipated African-Americans. The novel *Freedom Road* depicts the conditions of the former slaves in the town of Charleston.

Ranganayakamma is a famous Telugu novelist well known for her Marxist ideas. She is interested in the conditions of "The Emancipated Slaves". She had planned to bring out a literary monthly *Praja Sahiti* (People's Literature) in the 1970's. She thought of introducing some novels depicting the lives of the African-American slaves of the past so that they would inspire the reading public to think about the problems of that time and thereby think of changing the present day state of affairs. In the course of her search she found this novel of Howard Fast, *Freedom Road* (1944). She wanted to introduce the novel *Freedom Road* to the Telugu readers.

This paper aims at a comparative study of Howard Fast's *Freedom Road* (1944) and Ranaganayakama's *Swechha Padham*(2007), to show how the spirit of the original text is carried forward from English to Telugu and to show the differences between both the versions.

Key Words: Chattel Slavery, Re-telling, Emancipation Proclamation

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INTRODUCTION

When we compare literature of any one modern Indian language with that of English, we find a number of translated works which owe their origin to English. However the choice or selection of a particular work to be translated depends on the ideology to which the translator consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly subscribes. In Telugu literature literary individuals as well as organizations who are considered to be “progressive, leftist, or revolutionary” have translated some English works written by English progressive writers. The concept of retelling the novels written by English novelists has recently been in vogue. The practice of retelling the stories without major thematic deviations is very important. When readers read the retold versions of English novels they should feel the urge to read the original version and understand the text in a better perspective. The languages under consideration for this article are “English” and “Telugu”. The process of retelling the novels written in English is a new method of introducing the novels to readers of other languages. The need to retell the major works of English literature resulted due to a change in the reading habits of people. In the present generation some translators feel it better to retell the major English works without the major thematic deviations.

The process of retelling major English works to benefit the Telugu readers is done by Ranganayakamma. She writes forewords to her novels which enlighten the readers to the situations of the society. She begins the retelling of this novel *Freedom Road* by giving the title *Swecccha Padham*. She has given an account of The Civil War before the novel. The very first sentence of her introduction highlights the importance of the American War of Independence when the “Settlers” declared themselves as a Independent nation but did not care about emancipating the African Slaves which depicts the nature of the “Settlers”. There have been introductions to many great works of literature by Malati Chandur in her *Pata Keratalu*. Malati Chandur is a Sahitya Akademi Awardee. There is a major difference between the writings of Malati Chandur and Ranganayakamma. Malati Chandur, a major

woman writer in Telugu and a Sahitya Akademi awardee, does not detail the important conversations between the characters. In her *Pata Keratalu* (Introductions to major English Works). While Ranganayakamma depicts the characters and incidents in tune with the original versions. Ranganayakamma took up the task of retelling 3 major American novels which could galvanize the American society to the Civil War. The novels *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and *Freedom Road* (1944) could galvanize the American society to the Civil War and its after math. Telugu is termed as “Italian of the East” and is the native language to the Telugu people. The Telugu reading public could appreciate the works of Ranganayakamma because she dealt with the day to day issues faced by women. She has retold the novels that could change the course of history in America.

The American Civil War is a war between the Northern and the Southern states. It began after seven southern slave states decided to separate from the Union. Chattel slavery was the core issue over which The American Civil War was fought. The southern states strongly supported the institution as they already got the advantage of chattel slavery. The practice of engaging slaves was not prevalent to the same extent in the North. This was the main reason for the emergence of “The American Anti Slavery Society” (1833-1870) to emerge. This society was formed by William Llyod Garrison and Arthur Tappan, which had its head quarters in New York City. The society’s “Anti Slavery Sermons” and the speeches to abolish slavery were most common in the Southern churches. These initiatives helped to enlighten the slaves and many of them tried to flee from their masters. The “Abolitionists” in the South played an active role in containing slave practices.

Slavery was one of the major issues between the North and the South. “Sectionalism” in America refers to the differences in economic, social and political structures between the North and The South. In the North there was more industrialization and the South depended on agriculture. The southern land owners needed labor to work on the plantations and therefore engaged the African slaves on the plantations. The working conditions of

these slaves were "intolerable" and the discontent among the slaves began to increase since 1852.

1852 was the year in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published by Harriet Beecher Stowe. She was an abolitionist who fought against chattel slavery. She wanted to write a documentary on the suffering of slaves. She was supported by her husband. As she progressed with her work, she found that she had enough of evidence to author a novel that prepared America more fervently to the Civil War. During 1852-1865, there was a strong resistance of chattel slavery from the former slaves while the slave owners wanted to keep the institution of chattel slavery intact.

As the Civil war approached the discontent among the slaves had reached its peak and they started to unite to collectively fight against the masters. The incidents in the novel *Freedom Road* begin in 1867 when the former slaves in South Carolina were living as "Free Laborers". The American Civil War is discussed as a back ground to the novel *Freedom Road*. In her version Ranganayakamma details the American Civil War so as to familiarize the Telugu readers to the American situation of 1867. She always writes forewords to her novels which depict the actual conditions of the society to which her novels belong. She is very considerate to prepare the Telugu readers to read any of her novels. She begins her introduction to the novel *Freedom Road* with the American Civil War. The advantage of such introduction is that the readers are well prepared to understand the American situation of 1868.

Discussion of the Texts: The novel *Freedom Road* depicts the conditions of the emancipated slaves who were living as "Free Labor" in South Carolina. Howard Fast authentically declares that the incidents in the novel are true to that time. The plantation described in the novel is Carwell plantation belonging to Dudley Carwell, a wealthy landlord. In the words of Howard Fast "You may ask, and with justice, is there any truth in this tale? And if there is, why it has not been told before? As to the first question, all the essentials of this story are true. There was not one Carwell plantation in the south at that period, but a thousand, both larger and smaller.

All that I have told about as being done at Carwell was duplicated in many other places." (Fast 262)

The novel *Freedom Road* begins with a prologue describing the completion of The Civil War and the return of the "Freed Men" with victory. The protagonist of the novel is Gideon Jackson. He is to serve the convention at Charleston representing the "Freed Men" at the Carwell plantation. The novel has two plots: the first plot describes the journey of Gideon Jackson to "The Charleston Convention" and the second plot concerns itself with the collective struggle of the "Freed Men" to acquire their civil and political rights. The novel is different from the other novels not because of subject matter but its time period. This novel depicts the years after The Civil War. Andrew Mc. Donald commends the work by describing the series of journeys. In his words: "Appropriately enough the structure of *Freedom Road* is built around a series of journeys, both literal and metaphorical. Gideon is in constant movement slow at first, and then with increasing speed and determination. He returns to Carwell plantation from fighting for the Union army, his first "freedom road." Then he travels to town for "the voting" and we see his family greeting him as he comes back to Carwell to prepare for his service as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention." (Mc.Donald, 71)

The reader can understand that this novel is the tale of Gideon Jackson as the story revolves around him. He is a representative to all the former slaves as he urges for the approval of certain rights and privileges for his people at the "Convention". When Gideon returns to the Carwell Plantation, he explains that certain rights are granted to the "Freed Men." He also explains that they have to raise the loan for purchasing some area of the Carwell plantation. These changes occur over a period of one or two years after The Civil War. The awareness of the "Freed Men" regarding their situation on purchasing the land begins with the efforts of Gideon Jackson to make himself "Literate."

During his stay at Charleston Gideon reads "The Speller and Book on Proper usage". (Mc Donald 71). This book begins his journey to literacy. After the proceedings at the convention are over, Gideon learns that The Carwell plantation is going to be

auctioned and any one can purchase the land. When he returns to Carwell plantation he explains all that had happened since the time he left for the Convention. He is firm on the idea that the "Freed Men" should have some land of their own. It is commonly agreed that the men should go to work for the construction of the rail road and the women should cater to the household needs. The rail road work helps the emancipated slaves to raise a thousand dollars.

Gideon struggles to get the loan as no banker wants to help the emancipated slaves to become the owners of the land. He manages to get the loan at Boston and the "Freed Men" purchase some part of the land on the Carwell Plantation. The unrest among the former slave owners begins to rise and they plan for their attack. Gideon learns that the "Federal Troops" are going to be withdrawn from Columbia. It is the sign to show that the emancipated slaves would face danger from the former slave owners. He goes to Columbia and gives a telegram in a post office addressed to The President in the White House of America.

"Rutherford B Hayes The White House Washington Dc. Mr. President I Beseech you to delay your action withdrawing federal troops from columbia stop abolition of negro and poor white militia leaves pro reconstruction forces dependant on federal protection stop fear, rioting and terror stop loyal republicans. here cannot comprehend abandonment of all union elements in south. We plead your help and sympathy. Gideon jackson representative for south carolina." (Fast, 213)

The telegram is however not sent to Washington DC by the telegraph office and the former slave owners plan the attack. The emancipated slaves assemble at the Carwell plantation and start cleaning the dilapidated building. They come together to resist the attack. They are over powered by the former slave owners and thus this novel ends with all the emancipated slaves being killed. This incident leaves the former slaves terrified.

As the title suggests this novel can be termed as "The Road to Freedom" because The Emancipation Proclamation only liberated the

former slaves from Chattel Slavery but did not give them the freedom they desired.

In her version Ranganyakamma retains the spirit of the original completely. All the major characters and incidents are in tune with the original. The two plots to the novel namely: The Journeys of Gideon Jackson to achieve all that he wanted and the collective struggle of the "Emancipated Slaves" including the after word to the novel are clearly depicted.

Observations and Conclusion on the comparative study

I divide my observations regarding the Novel *Freedom Road* and its retold version *Sweccha Padham* under the following heads:

- 1) The description of characters
- 2) The incidents
- 3) Reactions of the characters to the incidents in the novel
- 4) Language variation

All the major characters in the novel get an equal emphasis in the version of Ranganyakamma. Certain characters who belong to the Convention do not figure in the version of Ranganyakamma. Carl Robbins, the Vice President of the First National Bank at Columbia and Anderson Clay, Jane Dupre and the members at the convention do not figure in the version of Ranaganayakamma. Carl Robbins is an important persona as the loan that Gideon shall bargain and get is fundamental to the survival of the "Emancipated Slaves" in the novel. If Ranganayakamma would have included Carl Robbins, her version would have presented the situation of the newly emancipated slaves more accurately.

Jane Dupre is a member of The Charleston Convention and when he tries to satirize Gideon Jackson, Jackson answers the questions most authentically. The version of Ranganyakamma would have been most interesting if she included these names. Their conversations do appear in her version but she misses out on these names. The Telugu reader wonders who these people are as they have fired satires against the "Emancipated Slaves"

All the incidents, major and minor are retained in version of Ranaganayakamma which are

essential for the reader to understand the spirit of the text.

Language Variation: To explain the language variation this article considers the views of Peter Trudgill and B H Krishnamurthy. Peter Trudgill is a socio linguist and he explains the difference between “The Standard Dialect” and “The Non Standard Dialect” in his book *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*(1997) In this book he specifically discusses the concepts and explains the variations in language used by different people for different purposes. Any one can easily make out the difference between the dialects in any language provided he is a native speaker. The varieties of a language are called social class dialects. In the words of Peter Trudgill “The diffusion of linguistic features through a society may be halted by barriers of social class, age race, religion or other factors. The social distance may have the same sort of effect as geographical distance. A linguistic innovation that begins amongst say the highest social group will affect the lowest social group. Social stratification is a term used to refer to any hierarchical ordering of groups within a society. In industrialized societies of the West, this takes the form of stratification into social classes, and gives rise linguistically to social class dialects.” (Trudgill 35)

B H Krishnamurthy explains the difference in the language used by “The Educated class” and the “uneducated class” in his *Language Education and Society*(1998). “Broadly speaking there are two social class dialects in Modern Telugu. “The Educated and The Un Educated.” This is an oversimplification of the complex linguistic situation involving communication of varying social economic and cultural back grounds”. (Krishnamurthy 63).

The emancipated slaves in this novel speak the “Black English Vernacular” and the former slave owners speak “The Standard Dialect of English” in the version of Howard Fast. In the version of Ranganayakamma, the former slave owners speak “The Standard Dialect of Telugu” and the Emancipated Slaves speak “The Non Standard Dialect” of Telugu. Thus Ranganayakamma could retain the spirit of Howard Fast’s *Freedom Road* in her *Sweccha Padham*. Any Telugu reader can understand and empathize with the “Emancipated

Slaves” and their conditions during 1868. The most important aspect of the retold version is that it absorbs the attention of the interested readers completely.

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