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## VASIREDDY SEETADEVI'S *MATTI MANISHI* (MAN OF THE SOIL)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is based on English translation (*Man of the Soil*) of Dr. Vasireddy Sitadevi's telugu novel *Matti Manishi*. This novel is translated into fourteen Indian languages by National Book Trust of India. The English translation of this novel is brought out by Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad. Vasireddy Sitadevi was one of the most creative literary personalities in the history of Telugu letters and was one of the great pioneers of India's modern literature.

Vasireddy Sitadevi wrote with a social purpose. A keen observer of rural and urban life, she depicted in her works the plight of the youth- both males and females and also answered some of the questions posed by the situations in which they are placed.

This paper depicts *Man of the Soil (Matti Manishi)* with its deep understanding of rural life in India, particularly in coastal Andhra, it is undoubtedly a great masterpiece of Indian fiction. It has been considered a great master piece also for its deep understanding of human relationships, its powerful characterization and its rare narrative qualities. It visualizes the emergence of an egalitarian society in India that would put an end to the various contradictions of class, caste and gender that plague our Indian society.

Seetadevi's presentation of the plight of the Andhra farmer has universal resonance.

**Key words:** evolutions, farmhand, convolutions, feudal system, atrocities, socialists, upper strata and terrorism.

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on English translation (*Man of the Soil*) of Dr. Vasireddy Sitadevi's Telugu novel *Matti Manishi*, brought out by Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad.

Dr Vasireddy Seetadevi (1933- 2007) carved a niche for herself as a sensitive novelist, keenly responsive to the inequities in the social fabric of her time. Dr. Seetadevi published over 35 novels, 9 collections of

short stories and scores of essays on a variety of subjects. Six of her novels have been made into successful movies; several novels and short stories were made into daily TV serials and TV films. Many of her novels have been translated into several Indian languages like Kannada and Hindi. Her novels, *Matti Manishi* and *Vaitharini*, have been translated into 14 Indian languages and were

published by the National Book Trust. Among her memorable novels may be mentioned *Matti Manishi*, *Marichika*, *Rabandulu*, *Ramachilukalu*, *Samata* and *Vaitharini*. Leaving an indelible mark on the course of Telugu novel, Seeta Devi called off her earthly sojourn on April 13, 2007.

#### Historical Significance

The idea of evolving "democratic people's culture" was hardly an agenda for revolution or socialism, but it appealed to individual writers, who took seriously the prospect of promoting the anti-capitalist struggle and the interests of the working class through their literary works. Its influence on the literary tradition as a whole cannot be denied.

*Matti Manishi*, written by Vasireddy Seetadevi, first appeared in book form in 1972. We must remember that there is a historical significance for this. The novel appeared as a serial in the Sunday Supplement of a Telugu daily and captivated the attention of numerous readers. On its appearance in book form, it won for her the Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi award. She has also the unique accomplishment of winning Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi awards for a record five times.

There is really no need to introduce the novel. Who should remind the readers of *Matti Manishi* / 'Man of Soil,' who hasn't faded out of the plane of memory?

First, we must refer to the historical importance of 1972, the year in which the novel was first published. That was the centenary year of the Telugu Novel. Exactly one hundred years ago, in 1872, the first Telugu novel saw the light of the day. There was an occasion and impetus for this. Lord Mayo, who was the Governor General and later Viceroy of India from 1869 to 1872, announced at Calcutta in 1871 that he would award a prize for a writing that would reflect the social mores of their society. It is not known how the writers in Bengal reacted to the offer, but Narahari Gopalakrishnama Setty, a government official in Kurnool, felt that "it would be useful to the Telugu-knowing people to write a *prabandha* detailing the traditions and social customs of the Telugu land." Accordingly, as

his ability permitted, he wrote in 1872 a novel under the title, *Sri Rangaraju Charithra*.

As at that time there was no equivalent term in Telugu for the English term, novel, Gopalakrishnama Setty called it "*Naveena Prabandham*." In 1879 Kandukuri Veeresalingam wrote a novel, *Rajasekhara Charithra* and called it "*Vachana Prabandham*." The novel was published in parts in his journal, *Vivekavardhini*. Toeing the line of Veeresalingam, Nyapathi Subba Rao, the proprietor of the magazine *Chinthamani*, which had been conducting competitions for Telugu novel since 1893, called it "Western type *Aakhyaayika*." Even in the other Indian languages, in the absence of a suitable term, a novel like *Kadambari* was called *Upanyaas*.

However, while reviewing Veeresalingam's *Rajasekhara Charithra* in 1896 Kasibhatla Brahmayya Sastry observed that the *vachana prabandham* could be called "navala," and suggested the root meaning as *nanamlaathithi navalaa*. The term is not only appropriate but also highly meaningful for the novel, which is characterized by novelty and tenderness. While the *naveena prabandham* was born in 1872, the term, novel, gained currency in 1896.

Although Gopalakrishnama Setty wrote the first novel ostensibly to detail the social and religious practices of the Hindus, in the novel he attacked the caste customs and differences, omens, propitiation of *grahams* (planets), obsession with whores, superstitions, and blind faith and also expressed support for the workers and sympathy for the rural folk, wherever possible. In the second novel, published after six years, Veeresalingam attacked several baseless practices. Researchers have come up with the figure 43 as the number of evil practices attacked by the novelist. They include: the idea of being possessed by evil spirits, medication by/for ghosts, omens of lizards, seeking foretelling, practice of *chethabadi*, the hypocrisy and ostentation of the heads of *peethas*, the stupidity of religious heads. He exposed all of them and fiercely attacked them. The early Telugu novels

attempted to make literature serve the cause of the evolution of society and reformation. The heads of magazines, which conducted competitions for novels during the 19th century, stipulated that the writers must keep these objectives in mind while writing the novels. By the close of that century – that is, 1899 – eighteen novelists wrote twenty four novels (out of which Chilakamarthi Narasimham wrote five novels)

It is difficult for want of reliable figures to determine how many journals, following the lead given by *Chinthamani*, encouraged the writing of novels in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But *Desopakari*, *Krishna Patrika*, *Saraswathi*, *Majuvani*, *Kalaavathi*, *Hindusundari*, *Janaana Patrika*, *Krishi*, *Kalpalatha* and *Saavithri* were already in existence by 1904. Among them, *Saavithri* was run especially for women. From the names, *Hindusundari* and *Janaana* we can easily guess that they are women's magazines. Along with magazines, publishing houses also pitched in for the growth of novel. Publishers like Saraswathi Granthamaala, Andhra Bhashabhivardhini, Andhra Pracharini Granthamaala, Veguchukka Granthamaala, Gunneswararao and Brothers, Kalahasthi Thammarao and Sons, Saraswathi Granthamandali, Kalabhivardhini (Parishat) Granthamaala published several novels by many writers.

Critics usually categorize novel into five types:

1. Pure romance
2. Historical novel
3. Social novel
4. Detective novel
5. Science related novel

But we must remember one fact. Literature is never a neatly compartmentalized box. The qualities of one type overflow and mix up with those of the other type. In a romance there can be adventurous acts, and in a social novel there can be murders and criminal acts. In addition to independent writings, there have been during this century many translations from English and Bengalee. Along with men, women writers also have produced a large

number of novels. Mention may be made of Pulugurthi Lakshminarasamma, Kanchanavalli Kanakamma, Maganti Annapurna Devi, Pulavarthi Kamalavathi, Seeram Subhadramma, Chilkapati Seetamma. There were also additionally twelve women novelists who had been writing by 1917. Seeram Subhadramma translated Sherlock Holmes' *'The Hound of Baskervilles'* into Telugu under the title, *Jaagilam*.

Several men and women tried to portray in their novels the social mores of the Telugu people and succeeded within their own limitations. Fifty years after its birth, there appeared turning points in the path of the novel. In a way, they were indicative of the parting of ways. Some continued to write smoothly in the old way; a few turned right and a few others turned left. It is after 1922 that novels questioning the religious practices, caste-based traditions, class conflicts, the relative importance of professions, the labor and dalit movements, man-woman relationships and the positing of one set of morals for men another for women, appeared.

Unnava Lakshminarayana (1874-1958) was a freedom fighter and a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. Still, at his 36<sup>th</sup> year, he went to England to study law and enroll as a barrister. He had a direct exposure to the Irish struggle for independence from the British hegemony. He realized that there could be different paths in the freedom struggle. He could also understand the class struggle in a society. He studied the Socialist literature and attained a deep understanding of the Russian revolution as well as the proletarian political scenario abroad. On his return to India, he chose a small hamlet for his study of the economic relationship between the landlord (the *sahukar*) and the dalit farmhand. He analyzed the psychology and conduct of the representatives of each class and made a mental note. The government arrested him in 1921. While in prison, he wrote the novel in the everyday language from the mental plan he had earlier made. Its title is *Malapalli*. The twenty chapters of the first part of the novel appeared in book form in 1922.

No sooner than the novel saw the light of the day, the government banned it alleging that it contained propaganda for Bolshevism. In 1922 the government ordered the removal of parts of the novel, which allegedly preached violent communism and encouraged the united struggle of the proletariat against the capitalists. Unnava did not capitulate. He forcefully and courageously argued, in his letter to the government, that propagating communism was no crime and that there was nothing wrong in encouraging the workers to unite in their struggle against the capitalists. People's representatives and news papers too condemned the action of the government. Praising it as a superb novel, C.R. Reddy, in his letter to the Law Member of the government, declared that *Malapalli* ranked next to *Kanyasulkam* as a remarkable work of literature.

Fifty years after the publication of the first Telugu novel, *Sri Rangaraju Charitra*, which appeared in 1872, came out *Malapalli* in 1922. And it is exactly fifty years afterwards that Vasireddy Seetadevi's *Matti Manishi* stepped into the arena of Telugu novel, in 1972. The means of production, class relationships, varying psychic processes, and their economic compulsions have been analyzed brilliantly by the novelist through the narration of various developments in the lives of persons of three generations. While the progressive poets inherited the legacy of Gurazada Apparao in their poetic works, Seeta- devi has demonstrated that she inherited Unnava's legacy of noble ideals and high standards. She held mirror up to social reality and the evolutions and convolutions in the feudal system.

#### **Matti Manishi/Son of the Soil**

Sambaiah is the chief protagonist of *Matti Manishi*. From the beginning to the end, he remains a man of clay: born in the clay, grew up in the soil. Nature educated him. The land is his slate; the farm is his school. As earth taught him a word each day, he practiced it in the soil itself. The earth for him was mother, god and guru as well. His father Venkayya came to this village to eke out a living, with hardly a

spare pair of clothes. The rich landlord Veerabhadrayya engaged him as a farmhand. After a few years, he has taken a couple of acres of land on lease. Along with his wife, he worked hard day and night and grew to the stage of taking twelve acres on lease. Saving every year grain weighing a *putti* or a little more, he bought two acres of land and handed it over to Sambaiah. Venkayya, his wife and son labored through sun and shower and brought home their hard work in the shape of harvest and when Venkayya passed away, he passed on five acres of land and a house to Sambaiah.

Relying solely on the soil, Sambaiah saved the income from the land and by the time his son was born, he acquired seven acres of wetland and three acres of dry land, besides a house plot, farmyards and passages. Eventually, he came to be treated as a small size landlord. By the time his son came of age for marriage, he owned eight acres of fertile land, farmyards, a concrete-roofed new house and cash of twenty five thousand rupees. He proved the truth in Vemana's verse:

The essence of soil springs from the earth

All philosophy rises from flesh

All that is born of labor is wealth

Gurazada Apparao declared that it was only when the roots of the noble tree of the country were watered with the sweat of humans that the harvest of wealth would be reaped. Sambaiah of *Matti Manishi* learnt these teachings of great poets through his own experience "The soil likes sweat. That is why the soil is where the sweat is. This land, this breeze, this sky above are the property of the sweating farmer; not of the one who lords over, sitting in an elevated palanquin" – that indeed was the philosophical thought – life's vision – of Sambaiah.

Slowly a desire for acquiring respectability takes root in him. He wants to enter into a matrimonial alliance with the family of the landlord under whom his father worked as a farmhand. By birth Balaramayya was a rich landlord, lord of two

hundred acres of prime land by the time his father passed away. Along with property he inherited the ego and arrogance of the rich. Showing off more than his worth, taking up challenges he is not equal to, are his inborn traits. He has four sons and three daughters. He divides his property among his four sons and spends thousands of rupees on the education of his sons. But nobody was good at education. He managed to perform the marriage of two of his daughters and sent them to the places of their in-laws. The four sons went their four different ways. There was a debt of forty thousand rupees. When he divided his land among his four sons, they could get no more than twenty five acres each and he was left with no more than eighteen acres of dry land and a house. He had to perform the marriage of his third daughter. The debt, along with the interest, rose to sixty thousand rupees. Though he looked respectable on the surface, he was no better than a fig fruit, which looks attractive outside, but inside is full of worms. Left with no alternative, he was compelled to marry that daughter off to Sambaiah's son. He could not pay the dowry he promised. Even after marriage the girl stayed on in her parents' house for three years. At last, agreeing with the mediator, who arranged the alliance, Sambaiah allowed his daughter-in-law to enter his house and start her family. The once-upon-a-time rich feudal system cracked up.

Until socialist system is ushered in, the feudal system does not disappear from society. There will be people like Sambaiah, who strain each muscle, totally relying on the soil and grow to be rich landlords. There are also middlemen, who never till the land, but act as brokers between the farmers and the capitalists and as agents between the buyers and the sellers. Cashing on the kindness and charity of villagers, they start in a small way, make profits and grow up into big landlords. Kanakayya belongs to such a tribe. Twenty years ago, he was going about in single *angavastram* with a few papers. Ten years later he was going round with a gunny bag and a little later grew to the status of carrying around documents in a leather bag.

Kanakayya, who was once thin and famished, changed in physical shape and financial status. He bought ten acres of land irrigated by the canal, demolished the old house and renovated it, spending another four thousand rupees. He acquired a 25% share in a rice mill where he used to arrange for selling the rice by the farmers. He bought a small car and ran it as a taxi. Collecting donations, he performed the marriages of his daughters and sent them off to the homes of their in-laws. Again, with donations, he educated his sons and made them lawyers. Resorting to cheating of high magnitude and playing the second fiddle, he amassed considerable wealth. Not merely buying up land, he also purchased the multi-storeyed building of the once rich landlord Balaramayya and turned into a rich shark. He became the president of the Samithi. When the old feudalists fade out, new feudalists take their places, but the system cannot be rooted out.

The son and daughter-in-law, on the pretext of delivery, leave the village and move to the town and set up their family there. After living in the village for thirty years as man of the soil, Sambaiah's son, infatuated with his wife, slowly keeps moving away the money earned by Sambaiah to the town. Like the anthills made by the ants, Sambaiah had collected his wealth, but his son forced him to sell the lands cheaply. The couple trusted unreliable persons, burnt their fingers, going into business venture they had no competence for. They got caught in the web of cheating, deception, the police machinery supporting criminal activities, the hordes of goondas who do not hesitate to indulge in inhuman atrocities. They became slaves of urban allurements, got addicted to vices and ruined their lives. The daughter-in-law committed suicide; the incompetent (good-for-nothing) son followed her. The son, who was at school, almost became an orphan. These are the evil effects of the selling out, in the lives of persons, who lose trust in the land while still living in the feudal system.

Though his hard-earned money was frittered away, Sambaiah does not admit defeat. Alone in his village, living on a piece of abandoned mound, he leads his life on, growing vegetables. The young grandson of Sambaiah, given up by his parents, joins his grandfather and turns into a man of soil. When Kanakayya, who once craved for his favors, refuses to let him have four acres of land on lease, he is not disheartened. Assisted by his grandson, he cultivates the barren land and reaps a golden harvest.

However, in the existing system, land does not belong to the tiller. It belongs to the holder of the legal document (patta). He does not enjoy the harvest of his labor. When Sambaiah and his grandson were garnering the crop into a heap, president Kanakayya comes along with the legal owner of the land and a posse of policemen and hands over the harvest to the legal owner and not the tiller of the land. Sambaiah, who is on the top of the paddy heap, feels shaken and falls down. The man, who was born in the soil and grew up in the soil, lays down his life to join the soil. The grandson, who was shaping up into a New Man of the Soil had once English education. Announcing "This Land is Mine," he strikes the legal owner with a hand stick and wounds him.

The police arrest him. While he is being taken away by the police, the boy asks for burying his grandfather in the barren land. The president mockingly asks, "Is this a village or a graveyard to bury dead bodies amid our lands and houses?" To this the boy, unable to control his wrath, vows, "I will turn your village into a graveyard. I will burn up your house. I will come. I will come back. And for you I will bring – a gun!"

"This land is yours, this harvest is yours," the message of Sambaiah reverberates through the earth and the sky. It is not merely the slogan of Sambaiah; it is the essential message of socialism. It resounds through the raised voice of each tiller of the land. If a peaceful solution is not found to terminate the feudal system, every New Man of Soil will have to take up the gun. The atrocities

committed by the upper strata in society will themselves breathe life into terrorism.

"Both the new and the old melt from the same mold mix and mingle and emerge as a New Force and move around like the chariot of Jagannatha. It is certainly the chariot of Jagannatha. Who is capable of resisting this speed and this Massive Force?" These words of Unnava uttered in 1922 resonate unambiguously in Dr Seeta Devi's novel of 1972. *Matti Manishi* lays the foundation for the establishment of an ideal society – Arudra.

Seetadevi never wrote without a social purpose. Studying the life around her from a complexity of perspectives, she mirrored the exploitation inherent in the feudal system with blistering clarity and remorseless honesty. The inroads of urban ethical erosion into the pristine rural ethos has been a recurrent motif in her novels.

In the person of Sambaiah, the novelist mirrored the aspirations, struggles and experiences of a farmer who trusts his land and turned him into a living, throbbing deathless individual.

The land is the constant and persevering feature of *Matti Manishi*. No matter what happens to the characters and no matter what fortunes and misfortunes come their way, the land is always there. It is where they are born and it is where they will die. In the face of heartless exploitation by the capitalists class, the hapless farmer feels the only way for self protection is violent resistance, as embodied in the character of Ravi. Seetadevi stated in *Matti Manishi*, "This is the initiation to revolution! Revolution is not somewhere far away! It is in him. When they grow up, they will rebel. Cause revolution. If you leave him today, because he is a child, he will grow tomorrow. If you leave him, because he is alone, there will be a hundred! And then a crore! Then it won't be possible for us to contain them. Your police and the military will be like locusts jumping into wildfire!" Seetadevi wanted her readers to see an entire people transforming its sense of individual and personal suffering into a shared militancy, confronting

collectively the social evils, and cohering into an unstoppable transformative force.

While delighting the reader, Seetadevi has touchingly conveyed certain truths of life to the readers, without directly forcing the point. It is through neglecting the wisdom in looking for parity in marriage alliance or for duel that Sambaiah's life ended up in dust. His hard-earned money turned into ashes. Abandoning the village, Venkatapathi migrates to the town, gets used to the luxuries over there, and as his desires multiply, finally unable to live, is forced to die miserably. Varudhini's life is a demonstration of the fate of women, who slip up morally and lead a hateful life in society.

One recalls the observation of Massingham about character creation and brilliant presentation by the distinguished British novelist Jane Austen. The characters, their conduct and their conversations are "sculpted with great variety, reflecting a wide variety of psychology. She has brilliantly created several characters out of the people with whom we are intimate. They stand as symbols of the traditional experiences. The incidents described by her, the revelation of thoughts of common folk, the portrayal of different moods of characters – remind me of the people I usually meet."

In the writings of Seetadevi one notices these trends and shades in good measure. It is not surprising that the novel, which closely meets the criteria laid down by Maugham, has earned the admiration of numerous readers.

*Matti Manishi* is a welcome novel that succeeds in its purpose of identifying a literature of social struggle that will have to be taken into account in discussions of the Indian literary tradition.

The poignant evocation of the rise and fall of the man of the soil Sambaiah is a powerful indictment of the lure of the city and ephemeral urban 'culture,' undermining human/rural values and reminds one of Thomas Hardy's presentation of Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* vividly portrays life in countryside China in the early 1900s. Her life in rural China gave her vast insight into the minds of

Chinese peasants. Buck's writing can also be viewed as depicting not just a Chinese farmer, but a "universal farmer," one who knows that his riches and security come from the good earth itself, which recalls the portrayal of rural life by Seeta Devi in her novels. Even John Ernest Steinbeck, the Nobel Prize winner, also felt that the only way to resist was for the exploited workers to come together in his earlier novel *In Dubious Battle* but arrives at a positive solution of the unity of farmhands in resisting exploitation by Farmers' Association in the epic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The struggle of the Joad family of Oklahoma tenant farmers, forced to turn over their land to the banks and journey across the vast plains to the promised land of California only to be met with derision when they arrive is a successful example of social protest in fiction, as well as a convincing tribute to man's will to survive. Steinbeck sought to change the suffering plight of these farmers who had migrated. *The Grapes of Wrath* is also a novel about the exploitation of simple people; it presents the plight of the dispossessed everywhere.

That is what happened to the Joads and others during the Depression; they became dispossessed from their land and home and forced to search for work elsewhere.

#### CONCLUSION

The artistic skill of the novelist lies in her presentation of the protagonist realistically without idealizing him as a sylvan saint; he is a man with strength of purpose, but also singularly rigid in his responses to emerging reality. Varudhini does not come across as a total flirt but impresses us as an emotionally frustrated woman, seeking fulfillment in life. Even Ramanatha Babu is partially redeemed in his wish to pay his due by taking the responsibility for educating Ravi. The characters presented by the novelist pulsate with remarkable vitality. The authentic portrayal of the village ethos essentially of yester years – occasionally, valid for a few villages even today – brings to life the impact of the inroads of urban culture into rural environment

and poised mindset. Seetadevi's presentation of the plight of the Andhra farmer has universal resonance. The (agri-) cultural specific terms of Telugu are mostly untranslatable, but the translator Prof S.S. Prabhakar Rao, tried to carry them across into English, as far as possible, taking unavoidable liberties with the original occasionally and even skipping a few, when they do not seem to affect the artistic attributes of the novel. Transference of certain Telugu terms has also been resorted to for investing the translation with a modicum of "nativeness" of the Telugu ethos.

It is with pleasure that I record my gratitude to Potti Sriramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad, for initiating the ambitious program of transculturation and I am confident that, sooner than later, Telugu literature – ancient and modern, in all its genres - will receive international recognition and critical appreciation it has always deserved.

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