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The Significance of Oral Songs in Nidhi Dugar Kundalia’s Presentation of the Halakki Tribe of Karnataka in Her Book “White as Milk and Rice”

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Abstract:

The book, “White As Milk And Rice” was published in 2020 by Penguin Random House, India. In this book, the writer, Nidhi Dugar Kundalia categorically narrates the stories of six isolated tribes of India: Halakkis, Kanjars, Kurumbas, Marias, Khasis and Konyaks. Nidhi Dugar Kundalia generally writes on socio-cultural issues, documenting human lives and their journeys through various settings. Her stories have also appeared in national newspapers and magazines. For the purpose of critical evaluation, the first chapter of this book “White As Milk And Rice” will be assessed and eventually developed into a research article in a disinterested manner. The very first chapter of this book titled “The Halakkis of Ankola”, pertains to the Halakki tribe of Northern Karnataka in India. The writer informs us about the Halakki tribe through a fictionalized rendering of their stories with a subtle journalistic methodology for the writer is also an informed journalist. This paper attempts to highlight the importance of songs in the tribal culture of the Halakkis. It is through the persona of Sukri that the writer emphasizes on the folk tradition of Halakkis where songs unprecedented importance. Sukri’s natural affinity towards folk songs and her ability to recreate the folk songs with ease and order is reflective of the collective behaviour of the Halakki tribe. Sukri’s adeptness at creating a new song for every situation seems unanticipated and magnificent for any reader in the course of reading. The writer has skilfully brought forth the finer nuances of this tribe through their songs and this paper will examine the same in the forthcoming section.



Keywords: Culture, Folk, Song, Tribe, Halakki.

Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's book "White As Milk And Rice" (2020) is a collection of six stories pertaining to six different isolated tribes of India. The book is evidently written from both the journalistic and the fictionalized perspectives. The first chapter of this book blends the folk songs with tribality in an inseparable manner. This article will restrict its discussion to Halakki tribe of northern Karnataka for the purpose of study. The writer presents before us the story of the Halakkis in an unadulterated manner. The presence of oral songs as performative elements in Halakki culture seems to be the focal point in the first chapter of this book.

The story begins with Sukri's childhood experiences as a teenager. We find her playing with friends, roaming about in the forest, and living in her childhood fancies. Her life at this point is just like any other Halakki girl; with one exception that she is an acute observer. At such a young age she has developed the ability to comprehend the "quiet beach", "solitary lighthouse" and the "swallowing darkness". One can find the silent responses of Sukri through the battery of thoughts she experiences as an observer only to substitute this silence with the "songs" she sings for every mundane and sublime experience of her life. The sensory faculty of Sukri is something identifiable with all Halakki girls of Ankola; which Nidhi Dugar has sensitively tried to suggest. Nature evokes Sukri and Sukri evokes nature, in fact her inner nature comes to a coherence with the world of nature. This coherence is manifested through her solo songs amid forests. Later in the story we find Sukri growing into an old woman and her voice becoming deeper and a little melancholic at times. But there is a ubiquitous presence of Sukri's songs throughout the story making us appraise her as a "singing woman" which is instrumental in perceiving the Halakki tribe as a "singing tribe" and various ethnographic studies have also found the same. The ethnographic researcher D. Prabha writes:

They have a rich cultural heritage with a vibrant tradition of folk music and dance. They are called the singing tribe of India for their unique singing style called Halakki Haadu characterized by high pitch, fast pace, complex rhythms, and intricate melodies. (Prabha, 269)



Nidhi Dugar Kundalia foregrounds the Halakki culture by ascribing it to certain cultural practices like the folk dance, folk songs, food habits, ceremonial rituals, dressing styles, collective behaviour, communitarian approach towards life. However it is the element of song that has been mainly emphasized upon by the writer. We observe that Sukri spontaneously responds to almost everything happening around her. But her most thoughtful responses are her songs. At one point when she is all by herself at home and listening to the sussuration of sea waves, she secretly hopes to visit the sea beach and get on one of those fishermen's boats and travel to faraway lands. She sings to the fishermen: "*Channa edige mette chenche tumbe*" which broadly translates as "O fishermen, please bring back my favourite betel bag that has just slipped into the water". Although the closest literal translations of such Halakki songs are not available, one can understand the broad suggestion of such songs. One can note that such seemingly involuntary singing of Sukri every now and then is aesthetically pleasing and helps in understanding the imaginative faculty of Sukri. The writer acquaints us:

As she works, she slowly starts humming, mostly out of habit. The others begin to hum too... They sing when they are content, when they are anxious, when they are sad; many songs in the same tune, with no formal knowledge of music. (Kundalia, 6)

The above remark of Kundalia adds to our knowledge of Sukri and of course the Halakki tribe of Ankola (Northern Karnataka). We also understand the folk/group behaviour of this tribe and as to how often they sing without realizing that they are doing it.

One essential quality of the Halakki songs is that they are never accompanied by instruments. They are always sung by women in groups of three or four. The absence of musical instruments make Halakki songs a bit less tuneful and its singing only by women make them high-pitched. This makes any Halakki song more distinct and somewhat different from other tribal songs in India. It has been observed that most tribal songs in India are accompanied with different musical instruments and the importance of those instruments is actually felt. For example, the use of "*tumak*" and "*tumdak*" (drums) in Santali songs, "*thiski*" (clapper) in Baiga songs, "*Gudum Baja*" (an instrument played with elbow) in Gond songs etc. Therefore, in this regard Halakki songs are a shade different from other tribal songs in India.



One afternoon, Sukri escapes into the forest and strolls leisurely until she starts hallucinating of a shadowy animal galloping in the forest with a continuous feral cry. She lets herself slip into the labyrinth of the mind with a sense of loss. She broods with the memory of her deceased husband and her child. No amount of interruption stops her hallucinating about the ghosts of her husband and the child. She later sees a new carcass and hears a tigress faraway, roaring deeply with a sense of loss. At this point she empathises with the tigress and suddenly grants herself a giggle and laughs in an unusual manner. Nevertheless she sings about dancing so hard, “about a joy so full that it cannot be held back: *thaarley O yyoyoi maleye nammoorgei.. thaarley*”. - the rain dance of Ankola (Kundalia,16). Due to unavailability of a literal translation of some songs, the closest meaning remains vague; but it broadly translates as “O rain, come and ensure the land flourishes”. This reflexive response of Sukri is actually very confusing to the readers as there is an internal contradiction in her behaviour. We find her choosing song over grief and singing over hallucinating. This reminds one of the protagonist Sethe in Toni Morrison’s novel “Beloved” where Sethe is choosing work over grief and poetry over hallucination as she too has lost her girl child to death. The writer here excels in dispensing the character of Sukri in an artistic manner. The writer is attempting to paint the persona of Sukri as a strong woman not given to grief and desolation like any other Halakki woman of the tribe. We don’t find Sukri mournful; rather hopeful who thinks about rain (for rain is symbol of hope) and sings about the prosperity of land for her people. Here one can notice the community driven sentiments of Halakki women from the vantage of Sukri.

Years have passed since Sukri’s husband and her adopted son died of excessive drinking, but she continues working hard in other people’s fields to feed her adopted son’s children. Sukri and other women work together. They work the hardest when separating the chaff from the grain using a grinding stone. But these women work mechanically in a rhythm in a very concerted manner with one another, singing songs in a chorus. This apparently shows that Halakki women are industrious and often work in groups in fields. Singing is an inseparable part of their lives, the daily rituals; raw and unstylized.

As the story moves forward, we find Sukri as a middle aged woman. Her physical health remains inconsistent. There is loss of appetite and body muscle. She has achy joints and a dull skin. She finds herself overworked. Her bad health is further aggravated as her adopted son “lies all day



where her husband used to lie drunk on *nausagra* (indigenous alcohol) and destroyed by the loss of his own sense of self". Sukri feels a sense of revulsion, the urge to run away from her place. She feels an informal sense of temporariness of the place. Yet she chooses to work for her grandchildren making her house only a place to rest after day's work; not a place to spend time being lazy. Halakkis use home only to rest and call their homes "*bidara*" or camp indicating its temporariness. Sukri on one occasion in the story alludes to cows. This allusion is reflective of her own condition at her age. She talks about cows. She says "they (cows) milk better when you sing to them" and "they (cows) prefer sitting in a corner and thinking quietly" also they have "intelligent eyes" behind the "thick lashes". For Sukri, cows are emblems of silence and intelligence. Sukri comes from a world where women are effectively more intelligent than men and they have a "voice" unlike the "noise" that their inebriated husbands and sons make. There voice is beautifully manifested as songs, making R. V. Patil call them "the singing women".

As the story opens, we encounter Sukri as a high-spirited frisky girl. She is joyful and there is a romantic element in her songs. The world of nature is central to her songs. As she grows into a middle aged woman, her songs get melancholic in tonality and diction. Lastly, in her old age, she chooses to sing of her ancestors and her own culture that fostered her all her life. These three stages in the evolution of Sukri's songs are well narrated by the writer. The writer attempts to change the context and ethos around Sukri to ascribe her songs to those situations. The writer establishes a congruity between Sukri's situations and the songs Sukri chooses to sing. This correspondence between the two helps the reader to contextualize the nature of Sukri's songs in the story. Here the writer excels again. The writer takes us through the three main stages of Sukri as a Halakki singer. In this regard this story happens to develop like stories written by James Joyce, where the protagonist as an artist evolves with the plot of the story (künstlerroman). For example, the evolution of Stephen Dedalus from boyhood to manhood in James Joyce's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" is discernible. Similarly Sukri's evolution as an artist from girlhood to motherhood is apparently discernible. The only difference is that Stephen's evolution and self-realization is facilitated and catalyzed by formal education; and of Sukri's through actual life experiences. But the common ground remains that both Stephen and Sukri feel alienated and it is this alienation that becomes a component for their creativity. Therefore to a certain extent, one finds a remote semblance between the two stories.



Nidhi Dugar Kundalia finally takes the persona of Sukri to an ultimate point where Sukri is visited by government officials and is invited by them to a state sponsored cultural programme to which Sukri is a bit reluctant as she has never sung in any such programme outside her village. A government official requests her fervently and finally convinces her to sing in the programme. On the day of that cultural event she sings and her songs completely surprise and please the public of Bengaluru. Her songs are well received by the public and she herself is taken aback when the people applauded her in one voice unanimously. But she knew that the applause shouldn't be for her. She clarifies:

Most of the pretty songs and clever lyrics are my ancestors: my mother's, my aunt's and my grandmother's. The way my mother could sing a song about a fretful child or spring winds". (Kundalia, 28)

There are at least two ideas in the above statement of Sukri. First, she sincerely devotes all those songs to her ancestors which is typical of most tribal songs of India as the singers/performers dedicate their folk art to their ancestors (*purkha* in Santali). Second, Sukri's reference to her ancestors is mostly the women folk; not any men in her family or outside it. She identifies the Halakki songs only with the women of her folk. Therefore, the thesis that emerges is: the Halakki tribe is a singing tribe and the Halakki singers are mostly women.

It is from this point that in the years to come, Sukri is invited to folk festivals and performances all over Karnataka. Sukri's songs are celebrated and Halakki's adoration of their culture and primeval land is appreciated. Later she gets to meet the Chief Minister of Karnataka, Mr. Ramakrishna Hegde who proposes her name to the Honourable President of India for the Padma Shri. By now, Sukri is a cultural icon of Karnataka and is hailed as the "singing woman of Ankola". But as a matter of fact Sukri remains unaffected by all appraisals she receives and is quite aware of the exploitative nature of state establishment and the so called cultured and educated people of cities. She constantly thinks about the welfare of her people and how inadequately the government had tried to bring them out from their present situation. The lack of education, no health facilities, deprivation from their ancestral land and men taking to alcohol were the main concerns of Sukri.



It is in the last section of the story we find Sukri going to Delhi to receive the Padma Shri at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. She goes to Delhi with the hope that her tribe will get the official recognition and the government will initiate some remedial and reformative work at her village. After a frightful journey in the clouds she found herself at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, practising walking upto a chair and sitting back. This was a usual rehearsal that takes place before the award ceremony. Sukri was still in Delhi after the award ceremony, gazing at the “starless sky”, when she received the news of her adopted son’s death. Her knees gave way; she sank to the floor in the government guest house. After some time, she gathers herself up and dislodges years of grief; the passing away of everyone she knew. She folds up her saree and feels an odd sense of relief. The only pleasure she got from finally living with a son was outliving him and then she softly hums a song in a singular tenor. Perhaps the singular tenor in her song was the commencement of her solo journey, the inner journey of her life. Thus the writer merges the outer and the inner into a resonance ending into nothingness, and an existential reality is manifested on the part of Sukri. Therefore, the opening section of this story was just an overture; the rest part is the actual opera of Sukri’s life as a real Halakki woman.

It is only in the last pages of the story we find Sukri living a life of a social worker. She is the most revered woman in the village to whom people listen curiously and respectfully. She always listened to the “sabha” with rapt attention. She constantly motivated people to send their children to schools and urged men not to use alcohol as an excuse to escape their sufferings. She welcomed Kusum Sorab, a western medicine doctor to sensitize people of health and hygiene and the doctor jointly with Sukri helped women with health issues, going around the village with a loudspeaker. Sukri with her friend Kusum, started an agitation with the women who were left to fend for themselves when unlicensed liquor shops along the north Karnataka coast snatched away the lives of the men in their families. Sukri often stood on stage and supported Kusum’s speech with her improvised “gumte” songs, which were generally sung by Halakki men. Just to bolster the appeal she was trying to make, she sang “gumte”. Here one understands that Sukri is using her songs as an instrument of reformation, a viable instrument of reformation she strongly desires for. Now her songs are not limited to “self” but reaching out to “others”. It reaches out in a manner that a drastic change is anticipated. Therefore the writer successfully foregrounds the persona of Sukri in the minds of readers by imparting her with the very songs she sings althrough the story.



At times, fact and fiction marry each other. They are intentionally and artistically blended together. This is an interesting practice in creative literature. We must remind ourselves of Sukri Bommagowda, a Halakki woman who was honoured with the Padma Shri for folk singing in the year 2017. She is fondly known as “Nightingale of Halakkis”. We may also remind ourselves of the writer who is primarily a renowned journalist. The writer has lived among the different tribes of India before attempting this book. Her journalistic experiences with the Halakkis find a voice in this book. She documents their lives (particularly Sukri for it is women who have maintained the cultural ethos of Halakkis) in a beautiful and poetic manner. This story is her journalistic as well as creative discourse on the Halakkis of Ankola. We find here, fact and fiction seemingly blending with each other. With a certain validity, the story bases itself on the life of Sukri Bommagowga whose songs straightened out “the revolutionary message”.

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