

Kuvempu and English Literature

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Abstract

National poet and Jnanapeetha awardee Kuppalli Venkatappa Puttappa, popularly known as Kuvempu is generally famous for his nature poetry in Kannada. But rarely anybody knows that his first love was English literature and he had read Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, Daniel Defoe beyond syllabus in his school days itself. Kuvempu could study till his secondary school education in Teerthahalli. For higher education he went to Mysore. It was not a smooth way to Puttappa. Hosamane Manjappa Gowda convinced Kuvempu's uncle (He had lost his father) to send him for high school in Mysore. It was Manjappa Gowda who explained Longfellow's poem along the forest way till Ingladi. Kuvempu records in his autobiography that it was his life changing hymn. It inspired him to be focussed in life and motivated to read English literature in-depth. He had played the role of Shylock in the play Merchant of Venice in his lower secondary school at Teerthahalli during first world war to collect fund. In High school he was engrossed in the study of English literature and spent time in library with books till night 9 p.m. every day. By the end of his high school during the year 1922 he published his first anthology of poems in English *The Beginner's Muse*. Later another anthology was published with name *Alien Harp*. He always dreamt of bringing the best from English into Kannada. He has translated several English poems into Kannada. Through these translated poems of English literature inspired Kannada literature. It gave a new bend to renaissance. Kuvempu continued the task initiated by B. M. Srikanthaiah. This paper focuses on the influence of English literature on Kuvempu and as well as Kuvempu's contribution to English literature.

Keywords: Manjappa Gowda, Beginners Muse, Alien Harp, Translation, Renaissance.

As Kuppali was a hamlet of a lone house, surrounded by forest without any school to study in Kuvempu's childhood was filled more with forest experiences. The sunrise of

Navilukallugudda, sunset of Kavishaila and Agumbe are remarkable in his poetry. His home was his first school. As there were no schools in Kuppali he and the other kids of the house got home tuitions. His father Venkatappa Gowda and his uncle Ramanna were well versed in Ramayana, Mahabharatha and other classics of Kannada. This gave Puttappa intimate touch with Valmiki and Vyasa. Kuvempu joined formal school in Tirthahalli along with his mates in his eighth year. Here he came under the influence of Ingladi Manjappa Gowda. His guidance and support gave a turn to Kuppali Venkatappa Puttappa's life. His initial exposure to English literature was through Manjappa Gowda.

English at his Lower Secondary school duration:

Puttappa was from a humble rural background where there was no school. He stayed in Devangi's house with his mother in Teerthahalli for school education. During this time The hymn which made his soul determined and illuminated was Longfellow's "The Psalm of Life". Hosamane Manjappa Gowda while going through forest explained the hymn as, "World and life are not mere zero dream. The soul which sleeps thinking like that is dead. Life is not false. Life is solid truth. You who have come from five elements will be dissolved into five elements, is a false statement. That applies only to the body. Not to our way, aims, pleasure, or not to sorrow, but to duty. Our duty is to toil. Everyday our way should grow further. Knowledge, art, wisdom is endless and vast. Our life span like lightening is so momentary. Any time may come the call of death. That is why in the war field of life, not like dumb animals, but must proceed fighting like warriors. get up and proceed! Let whatever comes! Moving winning proceed! Doing your duty learn to wait without losing your patience!" listening to these words my soul was illuminated, to my conscience it was a first upanayana!. Conscience was awake! "Where sleep now?". After going back to Ingladi he gets that poem written from Manjappa Gowda and byhearts. He writes that this poem stood as a mentor in his childhood.

English and literature at W.M.C.Hardwicke school at Mysore:

Role of Manjappa Gowda in making of Kuvempu is vital. He convinced Puttappa's uncle to send him to Mysore for high school education. There Kuvempu bought Pritchard's 'Studies in Literature' and Scott poets' 'Lady of the Lake'. He was so eager to read them. Though his English knowledge was not that good he referred dictionaries and with literature he mastered language also. At the beginning he struggled hard to understand English. Gradually he read Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Gibbon, Daniel Defoe, and other classic writers of English. He was so fascinated by the English poetry, novels and epic, that we can see the influence in his *Malegalalli Madumagalu*, poems and *Shree Ramayana Darshanam* which he writes later in his life. This period of his school life reading is especially important in shaping his ideology and personality. He writes in his autobiography that as he was admitted in Christian school, he did not get admission in Okkaliga's hostel. He and his friends from *malnad* region had to get a rented room for their stay in Mysore. This accommodated his reading in the library till nine o'clock in the night. This saved him from mean thoughts of

caste borders in hostel life. He could think and make friends beyond caste only because he studied in Christian school and stayed in a room with his friends. And this life gave him exposure to evening literary events. He could attend gatherings and discussions where B. M. Sreekantaiah, A. N. Moorthy Rao, D. V. Gundappa, T. S. Venkannaiah and other senior writers and professors influenced him. B. M. Shri was an English professor and tried bring new strength in Kannada literature. His *English Geetaganu* brought a new wave in Kannada literature as *Lyrical Ballad* heralded Romanticism in England.

He writes in a poem about Mysore city:

The temple of learning best

Where Muses sit upon the crest

Will bring up minds to glow like fire.

(*Nenapina Angaladalli* 2022 reprint. p182)

Contribution to English Literature:

Puttappa got engaged in inventing different metrical forms and concepts. His lessons in school and contemporary society full of freedom movement and people's conversion to Christianity gave content to his poetry. His crave for knowledge made him read lot. His formal and informal education went on incessantly. In 1922 came out his first anthology of poems in English. It was his first publication as a book. He was just eighteen years.

Dishearten not, my friends, this bard unknown,

Who holds an alien harp, and not his own.

(The Prelude in *The Beginners' Muse*)

In these lines he is aware that he is very young and new in the field. He is also aware that he is using foreign tongue as medium of his poetry. To see his metrical mastery the following lines are sufficient.

The mother left her child, and said,

'I cannot come with thee.

Run; let their rage on me be laid,

At least thy life to free'.

Before her kiss had left the cheek,

The Afghan sword had met

Her throat; and, with a moaning squeak,

Down dropt she before her pet.

Nearly all his study was in English and during the entrance class, he made an intensive study of the biography of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa written by Romain Rolland. This was a great landmark in his life. With the influence of this vast and in-depth reading Kuvempu became a writer with religious harmony.

James Cousins, the well-known theosophist from Ireland had visited Mysore. Kuvempu took the manuscript to Cousins. Though he appreciated the young poet's mastery over a foreign tongue, the richness of his vocabulary and command over its prosodic forms, he could not approve of the foreign medium chosen by the young poet. He asked: 'Why write in English? Why not write in your native tongue?' The frank views expressed by Mr. Cousins were not relished by Puttappa. He continued writing in English. Between 1923 and 1925 he wrote more poems in English which were published five decades later under the title *Alien Harp*. After *Beginner's Muse* he wrote more than hundred poems in English. After coming into the shelter of Ramakrishna Ashram he comes under the influence of Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo. Though he starts writing in English he continues translating English poems into Kannada and show the Kannada people the soul of western philosophy and poetry. He translated his own several poems into English. Some of his English poems were brought to Kannada by himself. He proudly writes that his entry into Kannada literature was through English literature.

G. S. Amur writes about Shakespeare's influence on Kuvempu as:

K.V.Puttapa (Kuvempu), a younger contemporary of DVG and Masti was also attracted to Shakespeare and wrote two plays, Birugali(1930) and Raktakshi (1938) under his influence. If Hamlet provided a source for Raktakshi, and Birugali closely followed The Tempest. Kuvempu was too strong a poet to translate Shakespeare literally or attempt simple adaptations. He internalised the plays and then tried to communicate his personal vision. Of The Tempest he says: "The philosophy of life reflected here is identical with the Indian world view. It is for this reason that the characters, situations and atmosphere appeal to the Indian taste. Birugali was an anuvada but for those who didn't know English, Kuvempu felt, it would be an original play. Though Kuvempu adopted old Kannada for translations of verse he achieved a felicity of language very few translators of Shakespeare have been able to achieve. (Amur G. S. pp35,353)

Even in the beginning of his epic *Shri Ramayan Darshanam* Kuvempu clearly records the influence of Dante, Milton and western ideology on his epic poetry.

Obeisance to poet, ...to Homer, Vergil, Dante

And Milton; .. To Kumaravyassa, to Pampa,

.....

I bow to one and all world Acharyas of art,

Discerning God's glory wherever some light shines

I bend my knees and fold my hand in salutation. (p5. Darshanam)

Like this the influence of English literature on Kuvempu and through Kuvempu on other writers and the contribution of Kuvempu to English literature is remarkable.

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