



Research Paper

A study of Space and Place in The Sharp Knife of Memory

Ayushi Bartwal

Department of Modern Indian Literature , University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to traverse the limits of space and place in Kondapalli Koteswaramma's autobiography titled The Sharp Knife of Memory . Her Journey translates into a study of cultural pathos that she is thrown into from a young age. The male world dominates the politics but her insight into personal events makes this narrative a unique introspection into the lives of fighters..

Keywords: space, place, autobiography, narrative.

Received 02 Apr., 2023; Revised 10 Apr., 2023; Accepted 12 Apr., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to map the movement of the protagonist geographically, economically, culturally and socially. In retrospect, the journey also throws light to the journey of development of the various centres of resistance where she stayed voluntarily or other wise.

Koteswaramma in her own words said that her journey “ became a ‘bridge abandoned’ ” ((Koteswaramma and Sowmya 120)) . She becomes the bridge between three generations , having outlived her mother, siblings, husband, children and fellow comrades. Her journey is tumultuous, with a plethora of experiences shaping into what she becomes eventually- a fighter. The interesting intake about her narrative being she is not only limited to impersonal events like the male perspective is bound to but it is inter-sped with her personal revelations which to borrow Stanton's words (1987) “essentials women's life experience”. This paper is divided into five sections corresponding to the almost century long journey that she has made , both within and outside.

1. 1920-1940 : Initial Years

Kondapalli Koteswaramma was born to a Reddy upper class family in Pamarru village of the Krishna District. Being a child widow she was subjected to criticism by her peers when as a child, after winning prizes for song dance and stage performances, she was ridiculed by her jealous mates that she was ‘special’ being a child widow.

She grew up in a household which encouraged her talent, spirituality and reform both were internalised from a young age.

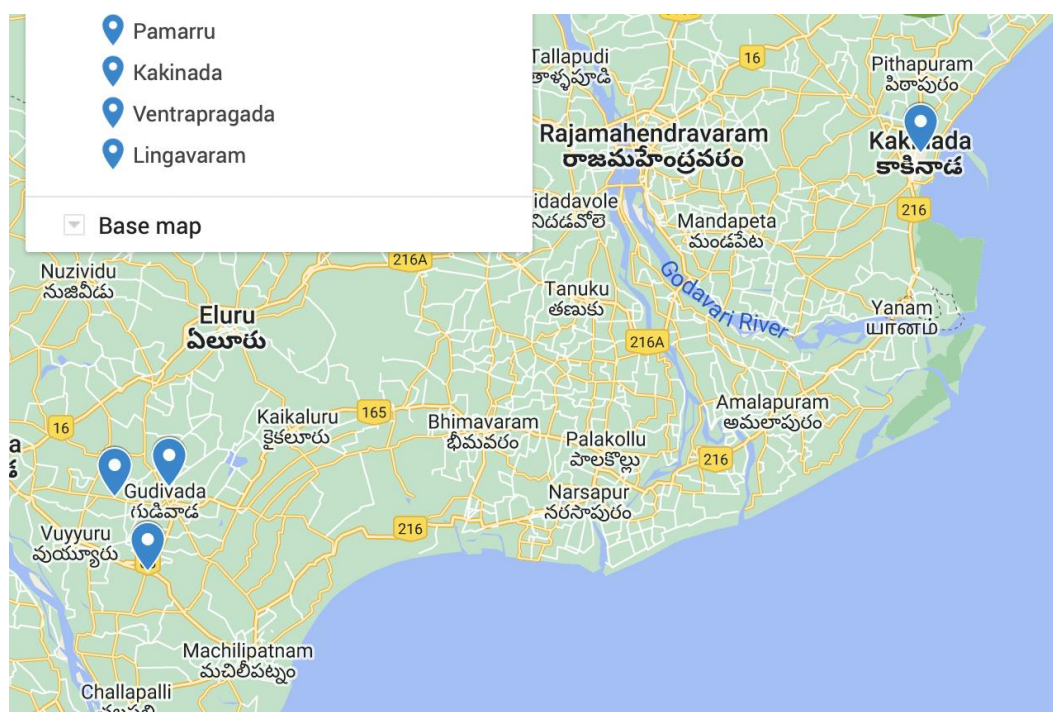
She meets Mahatama Gandhi in the village in enroute to Bandar, removes her ornaments and donates it as a ten year old; she is chosen to garland nightingale Sarojini Naidu as a student as well. She was surrounded by a political crowd , learnt and sang songs and hymns that had anti colonial ideologies establishing the fact that the family encourage revolutionary ideas regarding India's freedom from the colonial rule, although her school discouraged her from singing politically charged songs, as a result of which the bright child decided to discontinue her studies.

Her school discouraged political involvement, society at large practiced discrimination on the basis of caste and complexion and passed remarks about her appearance and ill luck- her being a ‘rich’ widow did give them leeway into the espousal market with ‘rich’ families vying for her brother's hand in marriage. Her deceased husband had wanted her to remarry, although her father was apprehensive and only agreed to the same after support from the teacher's union.

Although her father Subba Reddy seemed to have adopted certain principles of a reformist but her family struggled with the idea of societal rules and regulations and tried with their might to conform to the ideals set, even after their association with the left liberation movement.

Pamarru villagers were aghast upon hearing about her remarriage and fearing their objection she was married to Kondapalli Sitaramayya in Ventrpragada, a communist Bastian at the age of 19.

She returns to the village a few months later with her husband on the insistence of her father but she and her inter caste marriage is never accepted by the villagers. They tried to excommunicate the family altogether resulting in her shifting to her inlays place in Lingavaram. The village of Pamarru was a firka centre, an important geographical location in the context of the freedom struggle as well centre for reformist activities as well but the community was never able to forgo orthodox mentality of the past centuries- perhaps it was in the nascent stages of its blossoming into a liberal village with currently pseudo liberal tendencies.



Initial Years 1920:1940

Lingavaram welcomed her with open arms , she being saddled with gifts for her in-laws and the villagers. The villagers accepted the union, their house buzzed with young members of this community and and their chatter. Although they lived in a mansion with two farmlands dedicated to cattle and the haystack, their hesitation towards wilfully dismantling the caste system foreshadows her relationship with caste for a few decades, the help from Mala caste was not allowed to enter the main house come what may, her discussion with her husband-God illuminates her issue, she was ‘conscious’ about the hateful concept of caste based discrimination but she never has the courage to question why- that did not change in Pamarru and Lingavaram; she recollects being ranked below a dog while playing with a brahmin playmate by the grandmother.

Koteswaramma visits Gudiwara to participate in may day and October revolution celebrations along with her husband however it was she who was ridiculed by her mother in law , Sitarammayya ignored the jibes but she as a new bride was hurt by these words. Her mother in law also accuses her of influencing Sitaramayya and turning him against the custom of ‘naan’, a practice that as a revolutionary leader he had banished on his own in the household. He went a step forward and donates the sale proceedings to the party which enraged her mother in law.

The community of Lingavaram was more supportive of her political activities and welcomed her into the fold, however her in laws were less than enthusiastic of her social life, going as far to condemn her for her (non) participation in the choices and decisions that their son Sitaramayya makes, they uphold the caste based division as well.

Sitaramayya is then transferred by the party to Jonnapadu as a teacher at a Hindi school and to also preside over the party activities there, Koteswaramma gives birth to her first son here but he passes within a few months. Children at the school call her ‘Akka’ while her landlady becomes her ‘ pedamma’ and she calls this

She is first 'accommodated' in Bandar where she is made to undergo a 'natural' abortion by the party almost killing her in the process. She works for the party within the antahpur but she never knows what is going behind closed doors when the men of the party take decisions, the communist party in all its endeavours to educate the masses about the equality of the sexes and caste were not able to change their own party dynamics, her work was limited to preparing tea and food for her comrades. In another den, she along with a few not 'important' members are made to endure a cyclone in a poorly built house while important people and in fact documents were transported safely to another location.

She meets her husband in Eluru in one of the dens, who was on bed rest on the pretext of injury while in fact he had been ordered to undergo a vasectomy in order to control the population within the party. She is thrust into the middle of maintaining a huge household without any help as they party had forbidden household help fearing leaking of high profile information.

She travels to Vishakhapatnam with Koteswara Rao to another den. It is here that a fellow worker encourages her and his own wife to eat with the team and not after. It is also in the same den that certain male members approach females for sexual relationships which again point to the fact that 'they' were not above human emotions, 'they' were mere humans and these slips were to be seen as human errors as well.

She then travels north with Sitaramayya to Puri and Nagpur on party business, disguising as a north indian couple and is later shifted to bases in the Raipur region. She is united with her children here who had been in care of their grandmother and Rammohan Roy. It is also in Raipur that she comes to realise how women were being used to smuggle documents in their 'holdhall' without their knowledge and consent- the communist party was using people as pawn, something that they had championed against; they had proclaimed power for the common worker while on the other hand they were siphoning power from their own party members.

She is then moved to Gondiya, where she lived in a big terraced house along with fourteen other inhabitants disguised as a business family. The ban is lifted but the party members are still hounded by policemen in regular clothing? As a result of which she moved back to Vijayawada but still lived with a fellow comrade in fear of being apprehended, although they were promised that they would 'be back home in a week'.

Her return to the public life is "announced" by the party at Dantakarru in Gudiwada and in her own words it felt like "the Pandavas return to Hastinapur after their life in exile in the forests".

She had come to a full circle with her return to Vijayawada. She campaigns for the 1952, 1955 and 1957 elections at the behest of the party, proving once again her mettle in social settings- utilising her talents on stage to attract voters to their faction. While campaigning at Uttarandhra in the Krishna District they were forced to partake whatever was given to them from the enthusiastic and good hearted villagers; Rayalaseema was plagued with female oppression with women being questioned at every step they took outside in the world. The same endemic was plaguing the party as well.

Her time navigating through the many dens across states give us an insight into the intricate working of the party and its dynamics between the genders. It is shown how everything was not as rosy as it was painted, the red flag also takes into consideration the loss and the blood that was spilled not only in the battleground but also within the confines of the household, this part of her journey is connected to a lot of homes- houses for the lack of a better word, she lives with strangers who become friends but the underlying tensions never cease to exist.

The party also has complete control over the child bearing capacity of its members- with Koteswaramma made to undergo a dangerous abortion and her husband sterilised under the guise of being injured. All of these decisions are shown to be of the party- a group of people other than the conjugal pair who take decisions on their behalf. It also underlines the loss of freedom under the guise of freeing the masses, how party members could not afford certain "pleasures" which nonetheless were part of other people's day to day life.

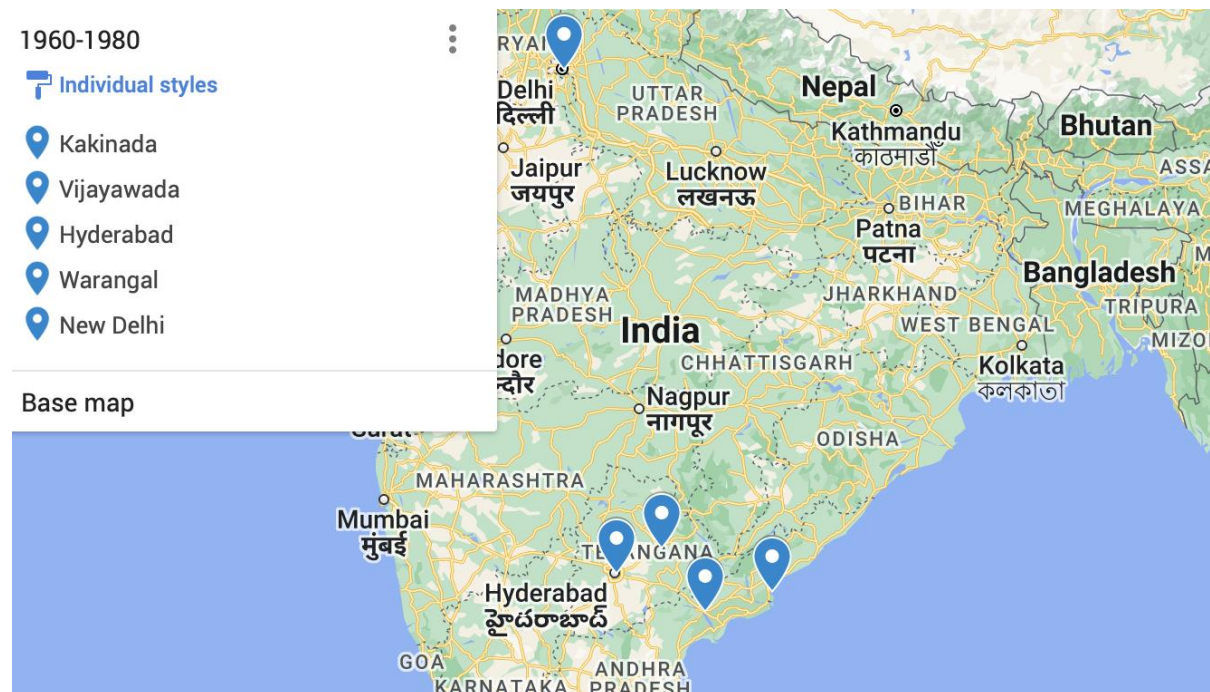
Her own body becomes a playground and battlefield for the party, her personal space is violated, she has no control over her space both figurative and literal. She is unaware of the locations that she is thrust into and her liberation is at stake every step of the way. The people will talk about police brutality but they cease to mention the barbarity which takes place within the confines of the household. She is used as a mule to transfer documents unknowingly in her 'holdhall' and is propositioned by male members for a consensual sexual relationship- thereby proving that the comrades were not above and beyond bodily pleasures.

The family is reunited in Vijayawada, with the children finally being able to go to school and live a conventional life with frequent visits from party members. Her in-laws leave for Warangal after Sitaramayya buys property there and her mother also moves in with the in-laws to help them in their household.

It is here that she has no help from her family, comrades and even her husband, who is out for days at end with the women and other party members. She is unable to cope up with the work and vents out to her husband who decides to leave for Warangal with Karuna citing her studies as a reason and sends Chandu for his schooling in madras. They were reduced to sell off their silverware for their survival.

Koteswaramma is liberated truly at this point- she has a family yet she is alone, she has the party who volunteers to provide financial help but she refuses the aid. She worries about her economic future yet decided not to take assistance from anyone as she is a self made woman. She decides to let her children stay with their father with Sitaramayya providing for them while renting out rooms of her own house. After migrating from one house to another , her own house should have become her safe haven but she has to share her space for money and therefore sustenance.

4. 1960-1980 Phase Thre



1960-1980

She moves to Hyderabad in 1961 living with the Andhra Mahila Sabha and completes her matriculation in her late thirties, another feat that very few can claim, she spends five idyllic years here. Meanwhile Karuna marries a doctor and Koteswaramma is not invited to the nuptials although Karuna does visit her mother with her husband Ramesh to take her blessings.

Her first job is at Kakinada as a hostel warden and it is here for the first time that she feels in place taking care of the children and their day to day affairs.

She has control over her life, her finance and her social structure only because of her education, as someone would quote in the beginning of this autobiography “education is far more important than archaic celebration of menarche.

She visits her daughter in her pregnancy in Warangal and witnesses two extraordinary events- the birth of her granddaughter and being served divorce papers by Sitarammaya after almost 3 decades of marriage- a lot of which was spent apart for their duties towards the party and their internal strife due to the unnamed woman.

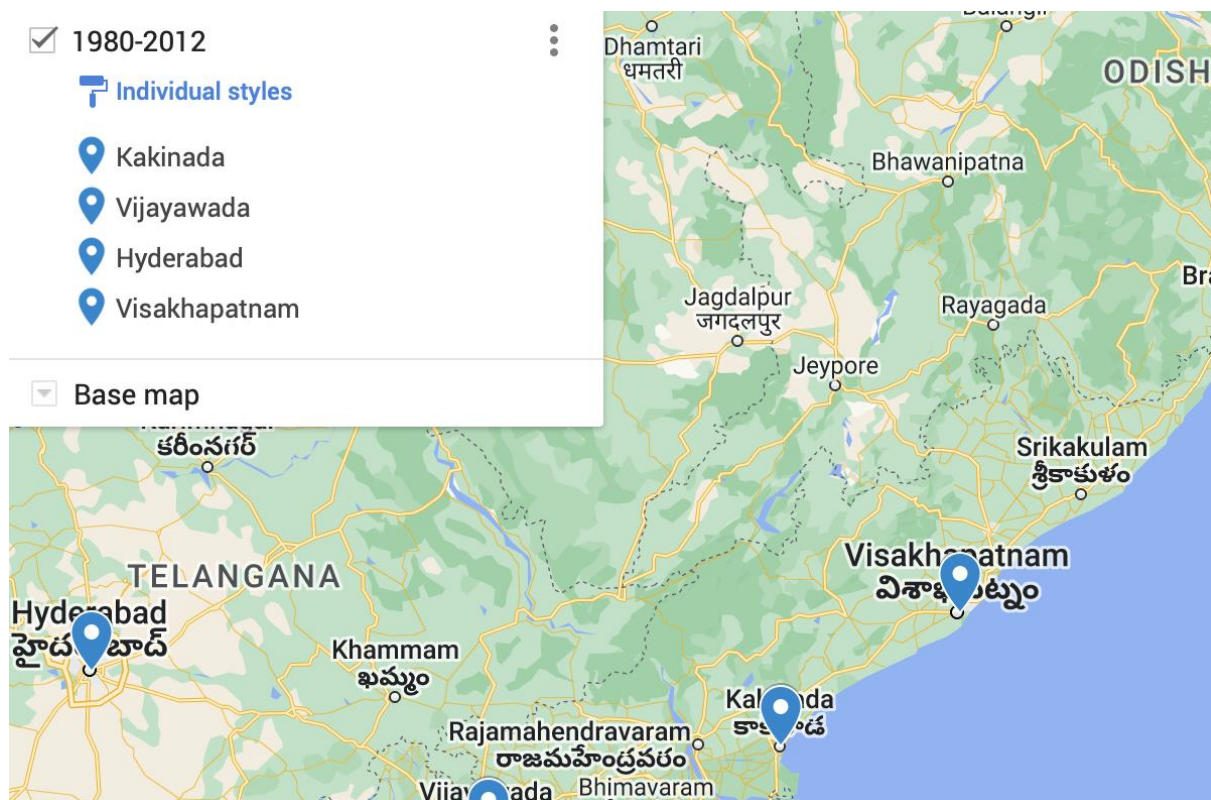
Her Chandu is taken in custody for being accomplice in ‘illegal activities’ and is never returned to the grieving family. Ramesh dies of a fever and she rushes back to Vijayawada to take cognisance of her mourning daughter and family.

She also has the chance to visit the new capital Delhi as Karuna moves their momentarily and witnesses the work that her daughter and son in law had completed for the Andhra community.

Karuna moves back to Vijayawada to be close to her family as she is unable to cope up and loses her life to her pain. These two decades were filled with personal grief and professional triumph for Koteswaramma. She becomes her own saviour having full control over her life but slowly loses her family to the scythe of the angel of death.

5. 1980-2012 : the Fourth Stage

After the government decides to change the retirement age to fifty five, she is forced to voluntarily take leave



1980-2012

after two decades of serving the hostel, she calls Kakinada as her ‘mother’ - something that we do not see in all the locations so far. Kakinada had nurtured her and given her strength to take on challenges and face the world on her own, without the support of her husband, her children and her party. She receives her due love and affection not from her blood but from the children and staff that has been there with her, she is valued as an individual who leaves a mark on the lives of multiple children that she has nurtured, it is in Kakinada that she finds peace, love and solace.

She goes back to Vijayawada and is invited to preside over Vikasa Vidyavanam as a warden till her move to Hyderabad to stay at the Chandra Rajeswara Rao old age home. She takes on the voluntary role of a warden here as well signifying the fact that she was a true leader who, when given the space and opportunity, thrives in social setting and can work under extreme duress as well. She meets Sitarammaya towards the end of his eventful life, alone befuddled with memories of a life and well past his prime, she feels nothing for the shell of the man that she once adored and called him ‘God’. A handful of people attend his last rites signifying strained relationships that he had with the community even after apportioning his whole life for the cause.

She moves finally to Vishakapatman to be with her grand-daughters and that is where she breathes her last as well.

Her journey is both inward and outwards, she comes across various pitstops but she feels at home with people that reciprocate her love and warmth. Her true freedom lies in her ability to voice out her life and her narrative in her own words.

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