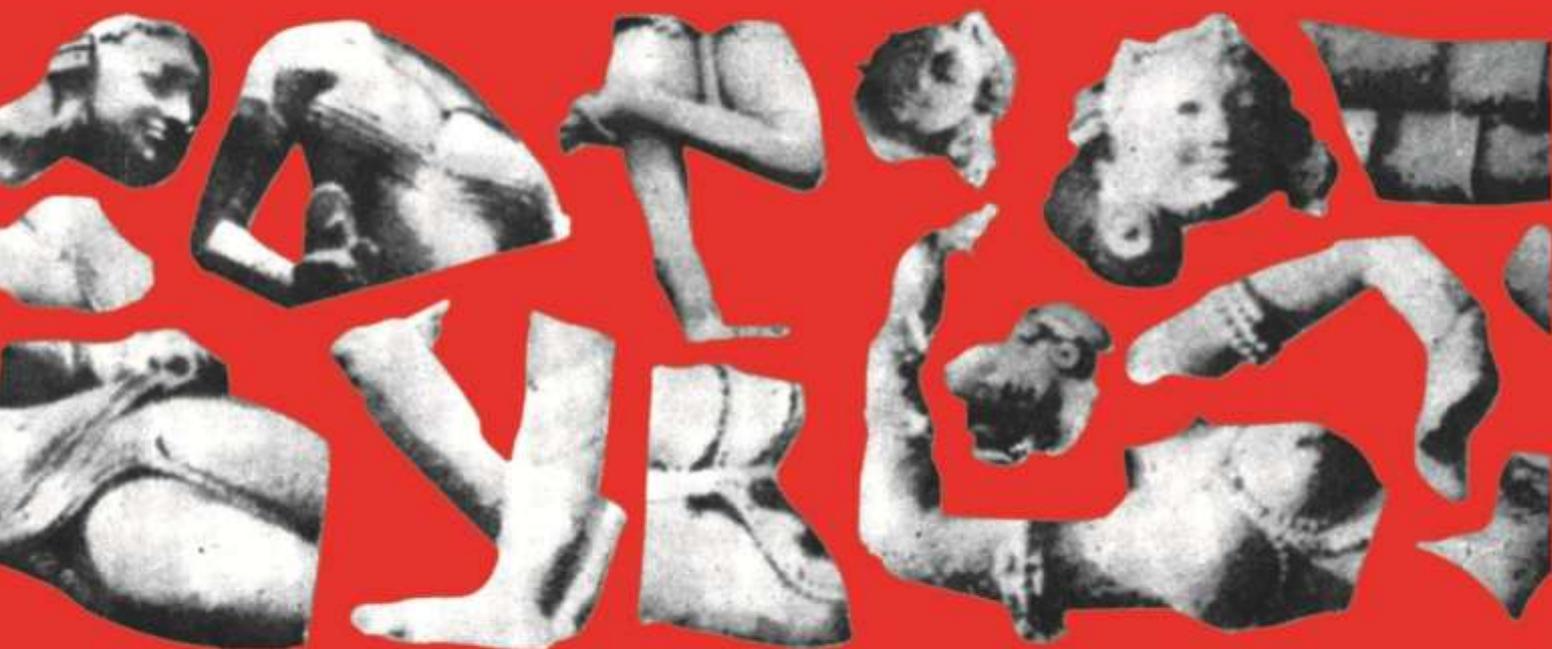


political stories

VOLGA



Translated by
Madhu H. Kaza
Ari Sitaramayya

Political Stories by Volga
Translated from Telugu by
Ari Sitaramayya, Madhu H. Kaza

© Volga, July, 2007

Design, book making : Jugashvili

political stories

VOLGA

Translated by
Ari Sitaramayya
Madhu H. Kaza

For Copies : *Asmita*, 10-3-96, Plot 283, 4th Floor, Street No.6,
Teacher's Colony, East Marredpally, Secunderabad.

Visalandhra, Prajasakthi, Navodaya &

Ari Sitaramayya, 1868, Heron View Dr.,
West Bloom filed, MI 48324 U.S.

Price : Rs. 100/- \$ 10

Layout : Sowmya Graphics, Hyderabad.

Printed at Charita Impressions, Hyderabad.

Swetcha Publishers
Hyderabad

Political Stories

by Volga

Translated from Telugu by

Ari Sitaramayya

Madhu H. Kaza

© Volga

July, 2007

Design, Book Making : Jugashvili

Layout : Sowmya Graphics, Hyderabad.

Printed at Charita Impressions, Hyderabad.

For Copies :

Asmita

10-3-96, Plot 283, 4th Floor,

Street No.6, Teacher's Colony,

East Marredpally, Secunderabad - 26.

Visalandhra, Prajasakthi, Navodaya &

Ari Sitarammayya

1868, Heron View Dr.

West Bloom filed

MI 48324 U.S.

Price : Rs. 100/-

\$ 10

Author's Foreword

The choice of the title for this anthology of short stories – *Political Stories* – may surprise many. When one looks at the titles of the stories included in this collection, such as “Sita’s Braid,” “Eyes,” and “Nose-Stud,” it is only natural to ask why the anthology had to be given such an unusual name. It is to explain the reasons behind the choice of the title and to suggest the outlook necessary to understand these stories that I am writing this foreword. You don’t have to read it before you read the stories. In fact, it is better if you read it afterwards.

The stories in this collection are about the web of myths woven around the bodies of women, and the relationships of women with other women, men and society in general. Our literature is strewn with bodies of women. Writers have not spared the description of even an inch of the female body. It is unnecessary to go into the exaggerations and indecencies in these descriptions. Writers have described the female body in ways that they thought were mouth-watering. A collection of the poems and commentaries on women’s bodies would rival the Encyclopedia Britannica in size. The consideration of women’s bodies alternately as attractive and loathsome, and the judgment of women through these colored perspectives became common practice in our patriarchal society. It is no wonder then that the writers who spent

so much of their energies describing the physical beauty of women's bodies also tried to deny women any trace of individuality. Even in *Puraanaas* such as *Bharatam* which contain glimpses of respect for the individuality of women, hundreds of poems describe women as base, fickle, and as the cause of all misfortunes. The poets of the *Prabandha*¹ period imagined women only as objects of pleasure. The Romantics did to women's minds what the earlier poets had done to women's bodies. The *Digambara* poets were even worse: in expressing their disgust with society with great effectiveness, they did not see beyond the bodies of women and the mythical entrapments woven around them. Perhaps this should not surprise us. The view, firmly entrenched by the late 1960's, that women's bodies were wretched made it easy for *Digambara*² poets to use women in their poems as targets of their attack against society. One doesn't have to single out the *Digambara* poets, though. The literature of that time contains plenty of poems in which women and their bodies are debased. Although many progressive and revolutionary ideas were popular at the time, the ideology of the patriarchal society towards women remained intact. It was only when women began to participate in great numbers in revolutionary movements, and challenged the dominating attitudes of men in those movements, that things began to change as far as women's issues were concerned.

That was the start. Feminism entered our literature slowly, and gradually become a formidable force. In this new atmosphere of feminist idealism, women tried to rediscover themselves. They began to understand their bodies and their natural rhythms not according to the myths and ideologies spread by others, but based on their own experiences. This wasn't easy, however.

For centuries the body of the woman had been suppressed. It had lost its strength and had become a stranger to the woman herself. Women lost respect for themselves and

¹ A form of Telugu poetry popular in the 16th century.

² Free verse poets of the 1960s: Nagnamuni, Cherabandaraju, Jwalamukhi, Nikhileswar, Bhairavayya and Mahaswapna.

began to look down upon themselves. When you think of this degradation, it is heartbreaking. If we look critically at our experiences and the experiences of our fellow women and analyze them, we will come to understand how our society built a deceitful culture around women's bodies. We will come to understand how gender roles were institutionalized to create "woman". Such attempts at understanding have been made by women in recent years. Women are writing stories and poetry based on their experiences. As this movement gains strength, and the myths about feminism brought about by western stereotypes begin to fade, a lot of people are beginning to seriously think about and discuss women's writing. They are welcoming this literature. But there are traditionalists and people who fail to appreciate the change of times. These people claim that feminist writings are inspired less from social awareness and more from awareness of the body and from personal matters. Some have even called these feminist writings blue literature. Whatever they say, it is our responsibility to let society know that when we write about our bodies, it is to express our social awareness and to expose the oppression and exploitation of women that our present society is built upon. Strangely, when we are ready to seriously discuss the ideology behind these issues, there is nobody to discuss it with, nobody to debate. Some drag our personal lives into the discussion as a distraction and create an image that feminism is nothing but confusion. I see no other way but to ignore such folks and go ahead with our work and say what we have to say. But there is a danger that some readers would believe the accusation that our writings are only about our bodily awareness. Due to the dearth of decent literary criticism, it is even harder to find critics capable of analyzing our writings from a feminist perspective. In view of this, I wanted to use this opportunity, offered by the publication of these stories, to talk briefly about the poli-

tics of the web of myths and deceits wrapped around the female body. I wanted to emphasize that these are serious stories about this politics. If we had good literary critics, it would not have been necessary for me to write this.

How have we understand women's issues until now? How should we understand them? If we look at recent times, a number of concerns have emerged as women's issues: marriage for child widows, sale of girls, lack of education, dowry, sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, financial dependence, and many others. For a long time we had thought of these as social evils. In a society devoid of sensitivity, knowledge and a modern outlook, men had created some roles and traditions for women. For a while we thought that if we were educated, and became scientifically knowledgeable, we could recognize these evils and get rid of them. All we needed was a couple of people dedicated to working for the reformation of society. If it became necessary we could pass some new laws. Eventually these evils would disappear and we would get the rights, respect and status that were due to us. That was what we thought then. But the reformers and the laws did little to change our situation. Scores of little girls are being married off even now. The sale of girls (*kanyaasulkam*) has been replaced by an even worse malady, the dowry. We are all aware how sexual harassment is becoming a nightmare for women who step out of the house for education and employment. Women who are employed don't have any liberty except for what is granted them by their husbands and fathers. Inequalities in marriage continue unabated.

It is time we ask why it is like this. It is time we realize that the so-called women's issues are not merely some minor, undesirable, social traditions. We should recognize that the very foundations of this exploitative society are built upon the oppression of women. We can't move forward unless we recognize this. Suppression of women is at the core of society's machinations. Our society survives on the oppres-

sion of women. We need to understand society not only in terms of goods and services produced, but also in terms of its policies on reproductive rights. Once we do that, we will understand that what we had thought of as women's issues are manifestations of controls imposed by men on the sexuality and the reproductive rights of women. When we realize how important these controls are for the existence of our society, we can turn our movements and struggles into social and political issues. Once we know where the problems lie, we can aim our weapons at the right places. This simply means we will turn the so-called women's issues into socio political issues and look for political solutions to the problems. The crux of it is this: if we understand that what we had always thought of as personal problems and family problems are in fact controls the polity has imposed on women in such a clever fashion that we had not even realized it, then we will understand that everything we do in our lives is related to politics.

But that is not easy to do. When you begin to question the beliefs that have remained with us for thousands of years, it sometimes feels like our very foundations are being shaken. It is difficult to understand how important our thoughts are about our bodies. It would be an equally difficult struggle to reach the stage where we experience the joy of thinking for ourselves. Women's impressions of the world, their values and opinions are based on their relationship with their bodies. As a girl becomes a woman, her body changes, too. And the oppressive controls on her begin to increase. Efforts begin from all directions to turn her into a slave. The two oppressions: oppression of the body to oppress her intellect and squash her individuality, and the oppression of the intellect to stunt her individuality and diminish her body - are inseparable. But at the same time we are constantly told that the mind and body are separate. Sometimes it is our bodies that are valued more and on other occasions it is our minds.

It is necessary for us to recognize today that the same relationship that exists between our hands and our brain in carrying out a task, exists between the body and mind. We should stress that our mind is not separate from our body. Women rarely realize that they have responsibilities for themselves or for society. They generally think that their responsibilities are only towards their family, their husbands and children. Take for example a woman dressing up and wearing flowers in her hair and looking happy and pretty (again a myth perpetuated by society – I am just using this as an example), the legend around this is that she should not do this for herself, but to please her husband; if she does not have a husband, dressing up becomes undesirable. It is the same with cooking. Women cook and eat. But if a woman is alone, she would think that there is no point in making an elaborate meal because there is ‘nobody’ to eat; so she would make do with some chutney. Evidently, a woman does not think that she should eat and remain healthy for her own sake and the sake of society; no, it is always for the good of the husband and children. These are simple examples everybody can recognize. There are other, more complex and sophisticated controls woven very strongly around us, that look very natural and make us believe that any thought of opposing them would be sinful. We ourselves reproach other women for breaking free of these controls, and our society, of course, does not even hesitate in condemning as criminal any opposition to these controls.

If a woman likes a hearty meal, the stamp on her would be that she doesn’t worry about her husband and children. *“MundugA thinnamma mogudAkalerugadu (a woman who eats first does not understand the husband’s hunger)”*; *“kadupE kailAsam; illE vaikuntham (she lives for her stomach)”* are some of our proverbs. The accusations leveled against a woman who dresses up when her husband is not around need not be rehearsed here.

These are things that are not too difficult to recognize and think about. But we are conditioned right from childhood not to think of such “trivial” things. We are used to accepting the dictates of how our bodies should and shouldn’t look, and what we should and shouldn’t do with our bodies. We are trained to despise the very nature of our bodies. We are trained to worry about escaping what we have come to believe as the wretchedness of our bodies. We accept the physiological functions of a woman’s body as being the consequences of her sinful nature, and, therefore, the atrocities committed on her body are her own fault. Even the educated and “scholarly” claim that if women wear proper clothes, do not appear provocative, walk with their heads bowed, don’t laugh so much, then, the sexual harassment of women would not occur. Becoming aware of these things and beginning to respect our own bodies is synonymous with working for profound changes in the attitude of our society. It is as necessary to fight against the societal myths built around women’s bodies as it is to think about power relationships built on the basis of class, caste and gender.

In writing these stories I tried to define what we are doing now with our bodies and how our relationships with others and society are shaped by what we think of our bodies. We need thousands of stories like this. I hope these stories will be useful in understanding how we have been molded as “women” in today’s society, and how our societal roles are defined.

In this anthology, some stories such as “Walls”, “Security”, “What Shall I do” deal with the misconceptions women live with and how breaking through them could lead to happier lives. One of the main strategies of this society with respect to women is to divide and rule. A girl may have certain definitive ideas about a mother-in-law even before marriage. Mother-in-law, sister-in-law, co-daughter-in-law – all

have stereotyped images. Two women might step into adversarial roles even before being acquainted with each other, remaining oblivious to their shared experience as women. That is how badly society has managed to divide women. One of the biggest myths propagated by our society is that marriage provides security to a woman; that without a husband, there is no security. The fact that insecurity derives from the relationship with a man is made completely obscure. In the name of love, affection, responsibility and such, women are forced to do things that are detrimental to their own self-respect. According to our society's propaganda, marriage and motherhood are the most cherished, ultimate goals for a woman. "Walls", "Security" and "What shall I do" question the motives behind this propaganda.

The stories presented here were written between 1985 and 1992. None of them were quickly published; most took more than six months to appear in magazines and some never did. Writing these stories was an interesting experience for me. It was like breaking into a new territory. While writing these stories I realized that it is not easy to think critically about our own experiences or those we have heard about; nor is it easy to understand the politics behind them, and shape them into stories.

In "Torment", the main character was depicted as being proud at her menarche since that affirmed her as a woman. You can imagine the rebellious transformation she went through and the battles she had waged to arrive at where she was. I had to wage similar battles to stand by that character.

I wrote these stories believing that I am rebelling against the culture that oppresses women. This culture robbed us of our power. It created its own definitions for our lives. It is the culture of the power mongers and controllers. Every piece of writing that rejects this culture is in effect a declaration of war on it.

Women's language, thoughts, emotions, in fact, everything, has undergone suppression. Today, writing, itself, is an act of rebellion for a woman. Sometimes it becomes impossible to write. One can't help wondering if there is anything to write about. Even today women must meet one of two criteria to qualify as principal characters in stories: they should either be revolutionaries or objects of horrible, gut-wrenching exploitation. Otherwise, the prevailing view is that it is unnecessary to write about women. That this is the state of affairs even after all those stories by *Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao*³ is unfortunate. Some diseases resist all treatments.

While writing these stories I realized how powerful the self-imposed censorship is on us. As I wrote, I wondered constantly whether what I was writing was appropriate or not. Subjecting every thought to a value judgment, analyzing it from a moral perspective – it was difficult to overcome the habit in spite of great effort. Writing these stories has given me the opportunity to try and learn to stay away from being judgmental.

Sometimes I felt that what I was writing about was already well known, but I was anxious to look at the themes in a new light and learn from them. I struggled more in writing these twelve stories than with any others. But I am pleased now in the hope that these stories present us a mechanism to learn about ourselves.

Volga
March 8, 1993

³ Popularly known as KoKu, he was a Telugu journalist, editor, short story writer, novelist and essayist.

Translator's Foreword

In the author's introduction Volga offers an explanation for the urgent tone of her short stories and situates her writing and its thematic concerns in relation to Telugu culture and literary tradition. It is in order to facilitate access to and appreciation of these stories for such a reader who approaches the text in English and from outside the Telugu or Indian literary tradition that I provide this brief foreword.

In trying to approach these stories on their own ground it may be useful to consider questions of genre and local literary practice. Telugu short story has generally reflected the history of the Telugu society, documenting major events and recording movements that shaped it. Feminist literature, including short story, became a major strand of Telugu literature beginning the early 1970s. Volga has been a prominent voice in this strand as a poet, novelist and short story writer. In her stories, and in Telugu short fiction in general, both narrative and exposition are often intermingled and both showing and telling are privileged. Telugu short fiction often retains rhetorical force and social consciousness that have been dropped in contemporary western literatures.

It is also useful to keep in mind that there is a good deal of literature in Andhra Pradesh (and in many parts of the world) that circulates through popular periodicals. The reader will find, in fact, that many of the stories included in this collection were initially published in newspapers and magazines such as *Eenadu*, *Andhrajyothi*, *Maanavi* and *India Today*. What I am trying to suggest is that literature in Telugu society has a relatively wide reach thanks to its inclusion in weeklies and regional and national magazines. Fiction and poetry are found in newspapers alongside national and local news stories, sports pages, weather reports, entertainment listings and so on; it circulates as part of the public arena and social world that newspapers and magazines create. Literature here has not retreated to the private sphere; it is engaged in public discourse. In reading Volga's stories we can clearly sense this public role of literature.

These stories do not supplant the present patriarchal order with a feminist order; nor do they supply quick and easy resolutions to the societal difficulties that women face. We do not witness feminist revolution and victory. But to Volga's credit, this is in fact one of the strengths of these stories, since to provide easy answers would be to betray the ethical imperative of these stories and the characters they portray. Rather, throughout these stories Volga follows the development of the female characters and traces how they become more self-reflective as well as critical about the societal injustice and inequality around them. These stories abound in uncertainties and many end on an ambiguous note. Often it is a note of questioning, which is itself a promising sign.

The focus on the body, and in particular, on its "parts" in this collection highlights the way in which the characters inherit distorted and fragmented ideas about their own bodies. The body is to be compliant and contained. To speak, sing,

or laugh is often enough to threaten the patriarchal order. To think, to question is equally subversive. At the end of the story “Shut Up,” for instance, we are told that the main character, Janaki, “could not contain herself. The laughter did not stop until it turned into a sob.” In response to her outburst her husband yells “Shut Up! Shut Up!” The simple assertion of her own spirit, the laughter and the sobs, is enough to enrage her husband and make him feel that he has lost control over his wife. Laughter, in particular, that unreadable sign of inner joy destabilizes the domestic power structure. Indeed, throughout these stories what we see is women and girls who cannot continue to be contained. They begin to speak, think, shout, and laugh without shame.

Political Stories don’t suggest that these characters have completely mastered their circumstances or overcome their problems. Instead the stories highlight the development of critical awareness and the process by which one begins to question societal norms. In fact, several stories such as “Sita,” “Eyes” and “Nose-Stud” end in questions posed by the main characters. This questioning is itself transformative. For they reflect moments of awakening in which a woman begins to think, and perhaps act, differently. In such moments, we see the possibility of change, the possibility of a different society.

Madbu H. Kaza
June 14, 2007

contents

sita’s braid	•	1
eyes	•	11
nose stud	•	17
shut up!	•	23
stony breasts	•	31
a political story	•	45
torment	•	61
marriage	•	99
security	•	109
walls	•	125
elections	•	139
what is to be done ?	•	153

sita's braid

Sita collects the clumps of fallen hair and holds them securely under her big toe. Whenever she combs her hair, so much comes loose. A month ago she came down with a serious illness. Although her sixty-year-old body has since gradually regained strength, her hair continues to fall. Looking at the silvery white threads coming off with each pass of the black comb, Sita becomes agitated. Tears well up in her eyes as the hair she once considered to be so precious falls out and she can do nothing but stare at it. Memories associated with her hair and the hopes and desires entwined with it stir within.

Right from a very young age Sita had understood that her hair was important. In fact, the very realization that she was a girl had dawned on her because of her hair. Her mother used to take very good care of her black, silky tassel as it grew. She would sun-dry various kinds of leaves and flow-

ers, soak them in hot coconut oil and work the extract vigorously into Sita's scalp. She was a busy bee on the days she anointed Sita's head. First she would apply pure castor oil to the hair, and then, after letting it soak for an hour, wash it with the extract of soap nut seeds. Afterwards she would light incense sticks, drying the hair as smoke enveloped the room, and then gently comb it to remove the knots. She usually topped it off arranging a string of jasmine or nutmeg flowers in Sita's braid. Looking at the flower-decked hair, she would kiss Sita on the head and say, "Pretty hair is what makes a woman beautiful." Because of all the fuss her mother made and the compliments her hair received from the neighbors, Sita felt that she was what her hair made her to be.

But once in a while Sita would get annoyed with the hair and want to cut it off so it wouldn't get in the way of everything she did. She wished she could have it all shaved off and could roam free like her brothers who were tonsured for the summer months. If she were tonsured, it wouldn't be necessary for her mother to work her hair every morning and evening. All that pain and suffering could be avoided. She wouldn't have to wait until her mother combed it all nice and smooth; she could just run to the playground whenever her friends called. Nobody would complain that she was roaming around with unkempt hair. On Sundays she wouldn't have to go through that hated combing to remove lice. On Sundays when her mother sat behind her with a fine-toothed comb, Sita thought of her as an incarnation of the God of Death. Should her mother find nits in the hair — you wouldn't wish that pain on your enemies!

She asked her mother one day if she could have her hair removed. Her mother scolded her: "Are you crazy? A girl should have her hair in nice braids, decked with flowers. Why do you want to remove hair like a hero?" Sita couldn't understand why a shaved head was becoming of a hero? And if it was such a good thing for a hero, then why not for her as well?

Once when she was not even ten-years old Sita witnessed a terrifying scene. It was said that the sixteen-year-old servant maid in the house of their neighbor, a doctor, had stolen something. She was sent away with her head shaved off clean and painted with white streaks of lime. She was neither beaten nor handed over to police. The maid went home crying her heart out. As she watched the girl walk home along the street, sobbing violently with her hands covering the shameful white streaks, Sita couldn't help crying herself. She cursed the neighbors for shaving the maid's head rather than yelling at her, beating her or handing her to the police. That night, as she removed the string of jasmynes from her hair and put it securely away in a towel so it wouldn't get crushed, Sita thought of the maid. Pulling the blanket over her head so nobody could see her, Sita cried for a long time that night over the maid's lost hair.

Sita had studied at a Missionary school from the eighth grade onwards. When she arrived at the school for the first time, Sita was shocked at the sight of the clean-shaven heads of the nuns. She remembered her aunt and realized that she had always thought that women were shaved off only when their husbands passed away. But these nuns weren't even married. Sita couldn't figure out why their heads were shaved. She and her friends discussed it.

End of Preview.

Rest of the book can be read @
<http://kinige.com/kbook.php?id=423>