

The Politics of Everyday Life: Women, Domestic Space and Quiet Resistance in Vaidehi's Writings

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Abstract

Vaidehi, the pen name of Janaki Srinivasa Murthy, occupies a distinctive place in modern Kannada literature through her sensitive representation of ordinary lives, particularly the lives of women whose experiences often remain unnoticed within conventional social narratives. Her writings do not always present resistance through dramatic rebellion. Instead, resistance frequently emerges through silence, humour, memory, everyday choices and the small acts through which women negotiate patriarchal expectations. This paper examines the politics of everyday life in selected writings of Vaidehi, with particular attention to Gulabi Talkies, "Going by Tables and Chairs," "Akku," and "An Afternoon with Shakuntala." The study argues that Vaidehi's feminism is most effective when it remains close to the ordinary experiences of women. Her women characters inhabit domestic spaces that appear familiar and secure but are also structured by hierarchy, custom and unequal power. At the same time, these spaces become sites from which women question, negotiate and sometimes quietly resist the structures surrounding them. The paper also considers Vaidehi's use of humour, female-centred narration and the reworking of familiar cultural narratives. Rather than portraying women merely as victims, Vaidehi gives them contradictions, desires, frustrations and forms of agency. Recent scholarship has examined her representation of Gulabi, patriarchal domestic structures and feminist retellings. Building on these discussions, this paper proposes that Vaidehi's major contribution lies in making the ordinary politically visible: the kitchen, the household, the body, conversation, marriage and everyday relationships become spaces in which gendered power is produced and contested.

Keywords: *Vaidehi, Kannada literature, women, patriarchy, domestic space, feminism, resistance, gender, everyday life*

I. Introduction

Literature does not always announce its politics loudly. Sometimes politics enters a story through a kitchen, a conversation between women, a marriage, a piece of furniture, a family ritual or an apparently ordinary domestic quarrel. Vaidehi's writing is particularly valuable because she understands this quiet form of politics.

Vaidehi, the literary name of Janaki Srinivasa Murthy, is one of the significant voices in contemporary Kannada literature. Her writing includes short stories, poetry, plays, essays and other forms, and her literary career has been closely associated with the representation of women and the social worlds of coastal Karnataka. Her work has also travelled through translation into English and other Indian languages. A recent interview with the writer describes the breadth of her literary practice and her long engagement with questions surrounding women's lives and identity. □

The Antonym - Online Literary Magazine

To describe Vaidehi simply as a "feminist writer," however, can sometimes make her work appear more straightforward than it actually is. Her women are not uniformly rebellious, and they do not always challenge patriarchy through open confrontation. Some accept social expectations; some negotiate with them; some resist them; and some remain caught between what they want and what society permits.

This complexity makes Vaidehi's fiction particularly interesting.

The present paper therefore examines the politics of everyday life in Vaidehi's writings. It focuses on the ways in which apparently ordinary spaces and experiences become connected with questions of gender and power.

The domestic world in Vaidehi is never merely domestic.

The household has rules. The body has rules. Marriage has rules. Age has rules. Speech has rules. Even furniture can acquire a gendered meaning.

Her characters live within these structures, but they are not completely controlled by them.

Women and the Ordinary

One of Vaidehi's strengths is her ability to find significance in ordinary lives.

Her women are not necessarily wealthy, politically powerful or socially influential. They may be wives, mothers, daughters, servants, widows or women living on the margins of respectable society. Yet Vaidehi does not treat their lives as insignificant.

This is where her writing becomes quietly political.

The everyday experiences of women reveal how patriarchy operates without always appearing violent or dramatic. A woman may be told where to sit, what to wear, how to speak, when to remain silent and how to behave in relation to men. Such instructions can appear harmless when considered individually. Together, however, they form a system of social discipline.

Vaidehi's stories make this system visible.

Her characters show that patriarchy is not maintained only by powerful men. It can also be reproduced through family habits, customs and expectations that women themselves may internalise.

This observation becomes particularly important in "Going by Tables and Chairs," where ordinary household objects become unexpectedly connected with gender politics. Bhalla's 2022 study identifies the story as a critique of patriarchal practices within Indian households and draws attention to the ways older women can participate in disciplining younger women into obedience. □

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The importance of the story lies precisely in its ordinariness.

A table and a chair seem politically neutral.

Vaidehi shows that they are not necessarily so.

Domestic Space as a Site of Power

The home is conventionally imagined as a place of safety. In Vaidehi's fiction, it is certainly a place of intimacy, but it is also a place where social hierarchies are reproduced.

Women are expected to perform particular roles within the household. Their labour may be essential, but it is often taken for granted.

This contradiction is central to Vaidehi's representation of domestic life.

The woman is indispensable to the household and yet frequently denied authority within it.

This is one reason domestic space becomes an important site of feminist analysis.

Rather than presenting patriarchy as an abstract system, Vaidehi shows how it is experienced in everyday situations.

Who eats first?

Who serves?

Who decides?

Who speaks?

Who listens?

Who is expected to adjust?

These seemingly small questions reveal larger structures of power.

The domestic world in Vaidehi's fiction is therefore a social institution in miniature.

"Going by Tables and Chairs": Objects and Gender

"Going by Tables and Chairs" offers an especially interesting example of Vaidehi's method.

The story's attention to ordinary household objects allows the writer to expose the invisible rules governing domestic life. A table or chair is not simply a physical object when social customs determine who is permitted to use it, how it should be used and what behaviour is considered appropriate.

The humour of the narrative is important here.

Vaidehi does not need an angry political speech to expose patriarchy. Instead, she allows the absurdity of everyday behaviour to speak for itself.

This makes her criticism more subtle.

The reader may initially smile at the situation and then recognise the inequality behind it.

That movement—from amusement to discomfort—is characteristic of Vaidehi's ability to turn ordinary experience into social criticism.

Bhalla's 2022 study similarly reads the story as an examination of persistent patriarchal structures and observes how older women may become agents through whom obedience is taught to younger women. □

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This is an important point because it prevents feminism from being reduced to a simple male-versus-female conflict.

Patriarchy can survive because it becomes habitual.

Gulabi: Agency through Presence

Vaidehi's "Gulabi Talkies and Short Waves" presents another form of female agency.

Gulabi is an unusual character because her influence extends beyond her direct presence in the narrative. The arrival of the cinema becomes an event that changes the emotional and social environment of women around her.

Cinema introduces another way of seeing.

It gives women access to images, desires and possibilities outside their immediate surroundings.

The story therefore connects female agency with cultural exposure.

The women do not suddenly become revolutionaries. Instead, their imagination begins to move beyond the limits of their immediate social world.

This is important because freedom often begins as an alteration in imagination.

A woman first imagines another possibility before she can demand it.

Al-Kaladi's 2022 study similarly examines Gulabi as a figure whose influence affects the women around her and reads the story through a feminist perspective. □

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The present paper extends that observation by suggesting that Gulabi's significance lies not only in her individual character but also in the social effects of her presence.

She becomes a catalyst.

The Female Body and Social Control

Vaidehi's representation of women also involves the female body.

The female body is never completely private within a patriarchal society. It is regulated through ideas about marriage, sexuality, respectability, motherhood and age.

This becomes particularly visible in stories where women are expected to conform to conventional definitions of femininity.

Vaidehi's women often appear uncomfortable within these definitions.

Their discomfort is meaningful.

It reveals the distance between the identity society gives them and the identity they experience internally.

Her writing does not always resolve this conflict through dramatic emancipation. Sometimes the woman continues living within the same circumstances.

Yet something has changed.

She has become conscious of the contradiction.

That consciousness itself can be a form of resistance.

"Akku" and the Question of Female Selfhood

"Akku" is one of Vaidehi's memorable explorations of female identity.

The character's situation exposes the instability of social categories such as wife, respectable woman and married woman. The outward symbols of marriage do not necessarily correspond to the emotional or social reality of a woman's life.

This distinction is crucial.

Society often defines women through relationships with men.

Vaidehi asks what happens when those relationships fail to provide security or dignity.

The woman must then negotiate an identity beyond the role assigned to her.

The significance of Akku lies in this tension between social identity and personal existence.

Vaidehi does not present her merely as a helpless victim. Instead, the character's persistence gives the reader access to a form of survival that is neither heroic nor spectacular.

She continues.

She negotiates.

She exists.

That ordinary persistence becomes meaningful because the social structure around her continually attempts to define the limits of her existence.

Rewriting Tradition: "An Afternoon with Shakuntala"

Vaidehi's feminist engagement becomes particularly interesting when she revisits a familiar literary-cultural narrative.

In "An Afternoon with Shakuntala," she reimagines the story of Shakuntala from a female-centred perspective.

The significance of this rewriting lies in the shift of attention.

The classical narrative has traditionally been remembered through a structure in which Shakuntala's identity is closely connected to her relationship with Dushyanta. Vaidehi instead creates space for the woman's own perspective.

This is not simply a retelling.

It is a rereading.

And rereading can be political.

A familiar story can change when a previously marginalised character becomes the centre of consciousness.

Rekha Datta's 2025 article is particularly relevant to this aspect of Vaidehi's work. It describes Vaidehi as a "resistant reader" and examines how her feminist retelling disrupts conventional representations of female sexuality, agency and narrative authority. □

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Vaidehi's strategy is therefore not to reject tradition completely.

She enters tradition and speaks from within it.

Silence as a Form of Expression

One of the more interesting features of Vaidehi's women is that they do not always speak openly.

Silence can have different meanings.

Sometimes it indicates oppression.

Sometimes exhaustion.

Sometimes fear.

But silence can also become a space in which a woman observes, remembers and evaluates her circumstances.

This ambiguity prevents Vaidehi's writing from becoming simplistic.

A woman who does not openly protest is not necessarily without agency.

Agency may appear in smaller forms: refusing an expectation, withholding agreement, making a private decision, creating a relationship outside prescribed boundaries or simply maintaining an inner life that society cannot completely control.

This is perhaps why Vaidehi's stories continue to feel relevant.

They recognise that resistance is not always dramatic.

Humour as Feminist Strategy

Vaidehi's use of humour deserves particular attention.

Humour allows her to expose social contradictions without turning the story into a political manifesto.

The reader laughs, but the laughter is rarely innocent.

A social practice may appear ridiculous precisely because the story reveals its underlying inequality.

This technique also makes her writing accessible.

Instead of explaining patriarchy theoretically, Vaidehi allows readers to recognise it in familiar situations.

The result is an intimate form of feminist criticism.

The reader is not standing outside the story and judging society.

The reader is invited to recognise society within ordinary behaviour.

Beyond the Victim Narrative

Perhaps Vaidehi's greatest strength is her refusal to make women merely symbolic victims.

Her characters are contradictory.

They can be loving and angry, obedient and rebellious, vulnerable and stubborn.

They sometimes make questionable choices.

They sometimes reproduce the same social prejudices that constrain them.

This complexity makes them believable.

It also makes the feminist dimension of Vaidehi's work stronger.

If women are represented only as innocent victims, they remain passive figures.

Vaidehi gives them personality.

They gossip.

They desire.

They quarrel.

They laugh.

They make mistakes.

They remember.

They survive.

Their humanity is itself a challenge to the social systems that attempt to reduce them to roles.

Research Gap

Recent scholarship has already established important approaches to Vaidehi's writing. Al-Kaladi's 2022 study examines the feminist representation of Gulabi, while Bhalla's 2022 chapter investigates patriarchal structures in "Going by Tables and Chairs." □ Datta's 2025 study adds another important dimension by examining Vaidehi's feminist rewriting of Shakuntala and the disruption of conventional narrative structures. □

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However, these approaches can be brought together through the broader idea of everyday politics.

The present study therefore shifts the focus from asking whether Vaidehi is a feminist writer to asking how feminism operates within the ordinary worlds she creates.

This approach reveals that her politics is not limited to explicit statements about women's rights. It is embedded in the details of domestic life, relationships, language, humour, memory and narrative perspective.

II. Findings

The study identifies five major features of Vaidehi's representation of women:

First, domestic space in her writings functions as a site where gendered power is produced and maintained.

Second, Vaidehi presents resistance as something that can be quiet and gradual rather than spectacular.

Third, humour becomes an effective way of exposing patriarchal contradictions.

Fourth, her rewriting of traditional narratives creates opportunities for women to become subjects rather than objects of representation.

Finally, Vaidehi's women are not presented as a single category. Their differences of age, social position, experience and personality prevent a simplistic understanding of feminism.

III. Conclusion

Vaidehi's contribution to Indian literature lies partly in her ability to make the ordinary worth noticing.

She does not always need extraordinary events to reveal injustice. A household conversation, a chair, a marriage, a cinema show, a woman's silence or an old story can become a doorway into larger questions about power.

Her women inhabit worlds shaped by patriarchy, but they are not completely defined by it.

Some resist openly.

Some resist quietly.

Some negotiate.

Some simply continue living in ways that challenge the identities imposed upon them.

This makes Vaidehi's feminism deeply human.

Rather than presenting an abstract theory of women's liberation, she shows what gender inequality feels like in everyday life. Her stories remind us that power is often exercised through ordinary habits, and therefore resistance can also begin with ordinary acts.

Vaidehi's writing ultimately asks readers to look again at the familiar.

The home is not just a home.

Silence is not always silence.

A story from tradition is not necessarily finished.

And an ordinary woman is never merely ordinary.

That is where the lasting political force of Vaidehi's writing resides.

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