

# REWORKING OF METANARRATIVES: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF SELECT PLAYS

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**Abstract:** *Postcolonial study discusses the bias in Enlightenment humanism. 'Enlightenment' itself used as a tool by the colonizer (upper class and patriarchal society) in order to impose their ideas over the colonized (women and subordinate class). The paper makes an inquiry of the contemporary rewritings of the Indian epics using as its theoretical framework caste and gender in Indian English plays. The classical epics epitomize the hegemony of the patriarchy and norms of the elite class. But, as Ambedker asks for the revisiting of the norms in every context, the present paper is an evaluation of the epics and presentation of caste and gender in them, which are reworked in the modern plays. The paper makes an observation of the subversion of women characters and the existence of caste hierarchy being presented in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The select modern plays interrogate these epics. The paper brings out how the gender and caste hierarchy made the women and the subordinate classes to suffer in the pre-independence and in the post-independence era. The selection of the plays holds mirror to the discrimination of caste and gender of that particular society, through postcolonial lenses.*

**Key words:** *Metanarratives, Little narratives, Postcolonialism, Enlightenment humanism, Civilizing mission, political pessimism.*

Indian literature is enriched with all forms of literature. However one cannot deny that, the form of drama has secured wide popularity and success. India has the richest history and its unique contribution to drama. Indian drama has found a fertile ground in different forms. It has been operating different ways in various parts of India. The present paper mainly focuses on the plays which are the reworking of the epics. Epic speaks of an old culture and civilization. The epic is a metanarrative of heroic actions often with a principal hero. The epics are usually mythical in its content offering inspiration and ennoblement within a particular cultural or national tradition. Some of the episodes in the epics are questionable with respect to the presentation of women and down trodden. However the modern plays reconstruct the select episodes from the epics and the playwrights try to interrogate them. These plays recreate some new characters and deconstruct the epic content. The playwrights have borrowed the theme from the Indian epics namely the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The select plays aim to examine the epics. The paper studies the plays and the study counters the presence of hegemony of caste and gender in the epics. In the analysis of the plays, the study interrogates the construction of the epics through postcolonial perspective.

Postcolonial study discusses the bias in Enlightenment humanism. 'Enlightenment' itself used as a tool by the colonizer (upper class and patriarchal society) in order to impose their ideas over the colonized (women and subordinate class).

The oppressor or the colonizer tries to deny the rights for the oppressed or the colonized. The postcolonial theory has its concepts in the European context. But a similar context of marginalizing one community by another, took place in the Indian context. Postcolonial perspective is applied to present the humiliating conditions of the women and Dalit. In the name of 'Enlightenment', the colonizer considered themselves as superior, progressive and kept women and lower castes as subordinate, primitive and inferior to them. This made them to dominate the women and the lower castes and impose their dictatorship on them by considering the women and the Dalit as the 'Other'. The dominance of the men and upper caste over the women and lower caste, respectively made them to impose their ideology over the 'Other'. Hegel speaks about 'Master-Slave' relationship. He brings out the concept of 'Lordship and Bondage'. The ruler propagates themselves as the Lords and restricts the 'Other' with the social and religious bondage to restrict them.

Ashish Nandy's concept of "Psychological Resistance to Colonialism's civilizing mission" is applied to analyze the plays in terms of caste and gender in the context of Indian colonization. The false notion of the colonizer that is the 'civilizing mission' of the colonized, against which the colonized show the psychological resistance, is seen in the modern plays.

The paper makes an inquiry of the contemporary rewritings of the Indian epics using as its theoretical framework caste and gender in Indian English plays. The classical epics epitomize the hegemony of the patriarchy and norms of the elite class. But, as Ambedker asks for the revisiting of the norms in every context, the present paper is an evaluation of the epics and presentation of caste and gender in them, which are reworked in the modern plays.

The paper makes an observation of the subversion of women characters and the existence of caste hierarchy being presented in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The select modern plays interrogate these epics.

The paper also makes an enquiry out how the gender and caste hierarchy made the 'other' to suffer in the pre-independence and in the post-independence era. The selection of the plays holds mirror to the discrimination of caste and gender of that particular society, through postcolonial lenses.

Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* (translated from Kannada by the author himself) are considered for the analysis in the present paper. Karnad revisits the epics and borrows the themes for his plays in which the plays destabilize the centrality of epics. Karnad has recreated some new characters in his plays, as he has created Swarnalata and Chitrakhe in the play *Yayati*. Karnad's plays have modern perspective and give voice to the voiceless. His plays bring new message to the modern women.

*The Fire and the Rain* presents juxtaposition of various ideas and emotions in the background of myths. The play tries to uphold traditional values, but it also has the means of questioning these values. Karnad picks up the myth but uses only the relevant part of it in his plays. He relates these myths to the facts of life. Myths and use of masks provide a rich texture to his plays and at the same enhance the knowledge of the viewers

about our ancient scriptures. Karnad does not use full story of the epic in the plays but picks up only the required part of it and tries to find solutions of the riddle of life through them. *The Fire and the Rain* is full of myths, which provide a rich texture to the play.

The power politics appears to provide the equal status or provision to all, but the hegemony is a hidden agenda, which controls the power. Frantz Fanon questions it for total liberty for all sections. He argues, "Total liberation is that which concerns all sectors of the personality."

### Women's Revolt against Patriarchy

The epics present the women as subordinate to men. The patriarchal notions of the post-vedic society are upheld in the epics. The man-centered society has silenced the women in the name of rituals, customs and religion. Seeta, Urmila, Draupadi, Mandodari, Madhavi and other women characters suffer in the bindings of the patriarchy. In the *Ramayana*, Seeta sacrifices her life and follows his footsteps into the forest without speaking a single word. But later Seeta is ill-treated by Rama. He suspects her chastity. Urmila loses her newly married youth. Her husband Lakshmana ignores her, soon after he gets married to her. In the *Mahabharata*, every man, who comes in her life, treats Madhavi as a commodity. In the *Ramayana*, Ravana never respects Mandodari's womanhood. In the *Mahabharata*, five men share Draupadi as their wife without her consent. She is humiliated in the court and is dishonored by her kin and kith. In spite of all these inhuman presentation of women, the epic celebrates man's heroism and uphold patriarchy.

The women characters get very less importance in the epics. They are duty bound to follow their men folk. This is treated as 'Dharma' of the women and it is their duty to do what is told them without questioning. The women have lost their identity and self-respect in the presentation of the metanarratives. These are the constructions of man, so they try to project man as superior to woman. Moreover, they have presented woman as the subordinate to man. The little narratives counter such a presentation of the woman. They try to get back woman's identity and self-respect. The little narratives deconstruct the patriarchal hegemony and reevaluate the presentation of women characters.

"The social and political system appears geared to continue gender inequality. It seems that the march to equality will be long and tortuous."<sup>i</sup> The patriarchal society has exploited the women by imposing the norms on them. Such norms are treated as the standards in the metanarratives. The march towards the social equality for all is yet to be achieved. By one or the other way the inhuman norms of the epics are imposed on the society at regular interval. This necessitates the need to revisit and examine the epics. The little narratives evaluate and rework on the plots of the epics in order to contemporize the problems that the epic deal with the devaluation of women. The play *Kanchana Seeta* presents Urmila as a rebel in order to destabilize, the epic in which Seeta is treated in an inhuman manner. These characters challenge the male characters and rebel against the treatment of women in the epics.

This has also been seen in the play *Yayati*, where Chitralekha asks for justice for the whole woman community. When Yayati takes the 'youth' of her husband, Puru, she asks Yayati to accept her. She says,

Chitralekha (scared but persistent): Yes, this is the moment. No one has faced such a situation before. No one is likely to again in future. So do you have the courage to accept the challenge?<sup>ii</sup>

Chitralekha accuses Yayati, for the misfortunes faced by women in his kingdom in the future. The play sensitively questions practices involved in the Swayamvara, marriage ritual and religious activities. The dominant practices involved in those have silenced the women. The play counters the epic. The play is a message to the modern women.

The women characters break the ego of the patriarchal hegemony. In the plays, the rejection of swayamvara and rejection of the decisions of kings are the rejection of patriarchal bindings on women. The plays bring out a message to the modern woman, who suffers in the hands of patriarchal construction.

Chitralekha proves her existence. She makes it, where it was not even possible to speak against king, Yayati. Simone De Beauvoir's word can be recalled here, who speaks about the existence of women. She writes,

"One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be"<sup>iii</sup>

Simone Beauvoir's works speaks about the identity of women. She urges for women's place. Chitralekha proves her identity and asks for the place (identity) in the palace. She does not wish to be a blind follower of Yayati. By disowning domination of Yayati, she questions Yayati's courage to face her challenge. The play speaks about the racial and gender discrimination, constructed in the epics. The dominant ideology is broken in the select plays by representing women characters as rebels and voices of protest.

The re-creation of the epics in the modern plays questions the presentation of false ethics about discrimination in the name of culture, religion etc. The play *The Fire and the Rain* tries to question social inequality upheld in the epics. Here Nittilai questions the religious rituals through her humanity, which are greater than any ritual. She saves Aravasu by scarifying her life. *Yayati* uplifts women's identity, in which Karnad creates two new characters namely, Chitralekha and Swarnalata to interrogate patriarchy. These plays restructure the plot of the epic by contextualizing the epic and thus provide social justice to the marginalized community. The play presents the theme with a universal appeal. The patriarchal notions in the epics are constructed only to empower men. The aspect of the epic is destabilized and restructured with a feminist perspective in order to give voice to the suppressed women. The re-creation also makes use of the symbolic representations of man and nature render the reworking of the plays more powerful in its implications. For example, Karnad's- *The Fire and the Rain* brings out the 'Yajna' and significance of 'Fire' in the Vedic period. The Fire (Agni) is represented based on the different levels and nuances of force in human consciousness. For which was presented as construction of Brahminic and patriarchal hegemony in the name of 'Yajna', in order to bring out the dominant ideology as the supreme. And it is broken in the plays. The plays represent the 'Fire' as an image of the purifier distilling the best of everything. Hence, the play *The Fire and the Rain* represents the elder brother Paravasu's end into the fire only. The play protests the belief of the society. The religious practices are recreated in order to bring out the social equality and justice for the suppressed community.

In the *Mahabharata*, Yavakri forces Vishakha to fulfill his revenge on his cousin Paravasu. He uses Vishakha to fulfill his sexual desires also. (Despite his wicked deeds Yavakri is presented as a great sage, who appears in the *Ramayana* also. He comes to bless Rama, when Rama kills Shambhoo to uphold Aryan supremacy) In addition, Vishakha does not have much value in the epic. The practice of Yajna glorifies Paravasu. It also glorifies Aryan rituals. The play, *The Fire and the Rain* deconstructs the plot of the epic. Lust for women and power through Raibhya and Paravasu are presented in the play. At the end the act of to see God by penance is demystified. It rains because of Aravasu's good will, who goes against false notions of Brahminism and Nittilai, who sacrifices her life for goodness. There is interrogation of Raibhya, Paravasu and Yavakri.

The practices of Yajna and penance are also interrogated and proved that these are all inferior to humanity. Aravasu and Nittilai become agents of humanity.

Being a woman, Vishakha takes revenge. On the other hand, Raibhya who was so proud of his knowledge and penance devalues Vishakha and tries to seduce his own daughter-in-law. Against this, she rebels and Raibhya's lust leads to his death. Vishakha is the real protagonist in the play who rebels against man's lust and Brahminic false notions about yajna, knowledge and power. She uplifts proud of women. Vishakha character is a voice of protest in the play.

The sacrificial yajna's falsehood is deconstructed in the play. Raibhya's jealousy for his own son, against not inciting him as the chief priest is brought out in the play. Vishakha says about Raibhya's greedy for power and lust for woman. Vishakha tells it to Paravasu,

something died inside your father. The day the king invited you to be the chief priest, he's been drying up like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him. On the one hand, there is so his sense of being humiliated by out. On the other, there's lost. It ensures him...<sup>iv</sup>

Vishakha criticizes Yajna, penance and power politics in the religious practices. She ridicules both of them, who desire for name and fame. Vishakha's character is voice of protest here, which is diverse from the mythical story. She breaks the greedy of priesthood of both Raibhya and Paravasu. On the other hand she breaks the man's masculine domination. Vishakha's words cause death of Raibhya and also greediness of priesthood power of Paravasu. The play gradually deconstructs the greediness of Brahminic priesthood and lust for women, presented in the epic. Vishakha becomes voice of protest who breaks male's dominance by causing Raibhya's death by his own son and also she breaks the masculine egoism of Paravasu, who imparts Yajna.

The select plays represent women characters as rebels. They have a voice to speak against their humiliations. They have a voice to protest her discrimination in the patriarchal construction. The women characters question the unethical behavior of the heroes of the metanarratives. The women characters even speak to punish the male characters about their injustice. This gives the message to the modern women that; women should not tolerate any injustice either inside home or outside the family.

The plays question the rituals of our marriage system, which are male centered. The women characters reject the swayamvara of male centered. In these plays the women characters question the unethics in the marriage rituals, which were always in favour of men.

The plays sensitively break the Aryan and patriarchal domination and speaks about the transgression of morality in the epics. The plays become voice of women and make them aware of protest against their humiliations.

#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>i</sup> Dube, S.C. *Indian Society*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1990. P.116. Print

<sup>ii</sup> Karnad, Girish. *Yayati*. New Delhi: OUP, 2008. P.65. Print.

<sup>iii</sup> Beauvoir, Simone De.. Trans and Ed. S.H. Parshley. *The Second Sex*. "Introduction to the Vintage Edition" Deirdre Bair. New York. Vintage Books. 1989. Print.

<sup>iv</sup> Karnad, Girish. *Collected Plays*. 10th ed. 2 Vols. New Delhi: OUP, 2013. P.32. Print.

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