

# THE NEVER-FULFILLING TRANSFORMATION FROM *MATSYAGANDHAM* TO *KASTURIGANDHAM*: *Unveiling the Essentialist Generalizations Adorned on Fisherwomen*

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**Abstract :** Through the play titled *Matsyagandhi*, M.Sajitha has tried to pour light on the punitive life led by a fisherwoman who becomes a bystander of the fluctuating socio-political balances. *Matsyagandhi* is about the toils of the fisherfolk and deals with their ostracized and relegated lives. Generally, the term ‘subaltern’ focuses on the social groups which are debarred from the society's time-honored configurations. In this study, I have attempted to show how M. Sajitha has given impetus for the marginal characters or Subalterns in her play titled, *Matsyagandhi* by entwining and interlacing happenings and perceptions from the lives of fisherwomen to splinter dichotomies that create the fisherwomen’s nonconformity.

## **Index Terms - Subaltern, Women, Caste, Kerala**

As our impetus rests on the fisherwomen of Kerala, we shall focus on the Araya community of Kerala. The Araya communities of Kerala inhabit the coastline areas of the state and this community depends on fishing for its livelihood. Arayars are believed to have descended from the Koli /Kalachuri /Kalabhra kings of Kalinga (Orissa), who came to the southern part of India to spread Buddhism and Jainism. After coming to Kerala, they created spousal relationships with Brahmins of Kerala. As a result, the descendants of these alliances came to be known as Arayans, which means “noble” or “spiritual” in Sanskrit. Even though the fisher folk of Kerala are scions of the kings of Kalinga, they are treated with contempt and are sidestepped, often, by the society. They are often circumvented due to the essentialist belief that they smell of fish. For the members of the conventional society, fish-stink of the fisher folk is like the Sword of Damocles because the conventional society always has a captivation for the sweet-scented body odor, which grants a difficult status for the fish-stink of the fisherwomen.

Even though race is a predestined genetic condition, caste can be treated as a socially determined grouping. So, this study aims to shatter the essentialist attributes which are created parallel to the socially constructed concept of caste.

In spite of being the Deputy Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Sajitha Madathil is a multifaceted person as she has donned the role of a producer, director, script-writer, actress and researcher. Sajitha was born in Calicut, Kerala, and she completed her Post-graduation in Theatre Arts from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, M.Phil. in Theatre Studies from Mahatma Gandhi University and Ph. D in from Jawaharlal Nehru University. Some of the plays written by her are *Matsyagandhi*, *Chanki Chankaran* Family reality Show, and Mother’s Day. Actually, *Matsyagandhi* was written for the World Earth Summit conducted in the year 2002.

The speaker in the poem is a widowed fisherwoman. Her husband was killed while his boat was hit by a huge ship. As per the Araya myth, “. . .[If] the mukkuvas [Arayas] who go out to the sea [are] to be protected by Kadalamma the Sea-Mother, their women have to remain chaste. Chaste and faithful” (89). On the contrary, the speaker’s husband died in spite of her being faithful to him. If we scrutinize this myth and the death of the speaker’s husband, we can come to the conclusion that the Araya women are victims of myths which paved way for their marginalization within their own community itself. It is obvious that her husband’s death would have made the others of her community raise fingers at her chastity.

After her husband’s death, the speaker is forced to sell fish to survive. Being a widowed woman, she has to leave her children at home without anyone to look after them. She is forced to leave everything under the control of her little daughter:

*Molay*, fetch my bag, will you? *Amma* has cooked some rice for you and kept it over there. See if you can get some fish for the curry from the beach. And take care of your little brother. Don’t go out to play. *Amma* will be back soon . . . Yesterday when I got back home the kids had already gone to sleep. (89)

The fisherwoman is forced to leave her home at four in the morning to reach the harbor on time. The death of her husband had already plunged her into dire poverty. And for buying fish at the harbor, she had to pay money. Even then the fish traders resented her pleas of paying half of the money. In other words, whatever she gained through selling fish was given to the fish traders without anything remaining for the survival of her family.

Finally, she moves to the bus stop to start her job of selling fish. At the bus stop, “people wrinkle their noses at the fish baskets and the smell of the fish” (90). Through the experiences of the fisherwoman at the bus stop, Sajitha has successfully poured light on the double standards of the society. People have no problem in eating cooked fish, but they get chided by the fish-stink of the women who sell it. In *Matsyaganddhi*, the speaker rightfully rebukes the people who complain of her fish-stink:

And they say I stink, Fish-stink. Going around selling fish, what else can I smell of? Jasmine? These fellows- don't they have mothers and sisters? It's such a tough job selling fish. But-when you have a plate full of fish on the dining table, it's so delicious, isn't it?! (90)

The dominance of power-structured relationships is evident in the case of the fisherwomen also. While learning the tale of the speaker of the play, we are able to get a picture of the hard lives led by a majority of fisherwomen. After arguing with the fish traders and facing the resentment of the people at the bus stop, the speaker has to struggle under the clutches of patriarchy at the market. At the market, she is compelled to occupy the dirty spots at the market, to be “muffled up by the flies and bitten by the mosquitoes” (91) because all the good spots are snatched away by the “puffed-up males” (90), who arrive before the women. The hypocrisy of the patriarchal society is evident from the demeanor of the men at the market. They always wear “polyester shirts, spray themselves with perfumes and go around in vehicles” (90) and they also “sell it cheap, the fish, so all the regulars are after them” (91). In other words, the women at the market suffer due to the men who make them sit in untidy spots and make them lose all the customers.

On the other hand, this study proposes to unveil the essentialist traits showered on fisherwomen. As per the concept of essentialism, all entities have certain attributes of its own. For the conventional society, the fish-stink associated with the fisherwomen is like a signal of their otherness. The conventional society takes the foul smell of the fish-stink as something which is in sync with the characteristic features of the fisherwomen. Here, the society's perspective is based on objectivity. The so-called contemporary members of the society do not take the trouble to find out the reason behind the fish-stink. Instead, the society gives them the life-long stamp of being foul, dirty, filthy, and uncouth. The society is not bothered to think on the basis of subjectivity and does not understand the fact that the fisherwomen become unclean, coarse, and grimy due to the society itself. As per the unnamed speaker of the play:

. . . the tap at the fish market-not a drop of water. Let our head and hands and breasts smell of fish. Not clean enough, eh? Under the tap the women tear at each other's hair for a drop of drinking water. And our men break our heads saying there's no water to drink. (91)

Similarly, the fisherwomen are made to face a lot of mayhems like poverty, rape, prostitution etc. At the end of the play, the speaker shatters the two-facedness of the society by proclaiming that, “Now that our Kadalamma is being snatched away from us by the government, my only hope is this *matsyaganddham*, this smell of the fish. To those who visit the seashore looking for a good time I can offer not fish alone, but *Matsyaganddhis* too” (93).

Through *Matsyaganddhi*, the playwright also raises her voice against the men who raped Flory, a fish-vending woman in broad daylight. Flory can be seen as one among the many fisherwomen who were brutally raped and slaughtered by the so-called up-to-the-minute society. It is also important to note that the men who raped Flory were not bothered about her fish-stink. The irony lies in the fact that the fish-stink gets excluded while the men crave for the bodies of the fisherwomen. On the whole, through the story of the speaker, the reader gets an opportunity to discern the subjective positions that oversee the lives of the fisherwomen.

Therefore, the Feminist Standpoint Theory ascertains the importance of the understandings of women with regard to the usual male supremacy in customary arenas of knowledge. By narrating the tale of a single fisherwoman, Sajitha has successfully accomplished the task of depicting the tales of all the marginalized fisherwomen who have been attacked by the traditional and time-honored etiquettes of the society. With the exposé of the life of the fisherwoman, the interpretations and assessments circulated by the dominant society and men get shattered.

The best way to conclude this study is by quoting Sajitha's own words regarding the message conveyed by her play. According to Sajitha:

The script [of *Matsyaganddhi*] is based on my conversations with them [fisherwomen]. I knew my play had reached out to them when I found a woman 10 weeping at the end of my performance – the play wasn't complete then and it wasn't a proper staging as such – on the beach in Veli, Thiruvanthapuram. She was the sister of a fisherwoman who had been raped.

## REFERENCES

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