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EXPLORING RESISTANCE AND FEMALE AGENCY IN BHISHAM SAHNI'S MADHAVI AND VARSHA ADALJA'S MANDODARI

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Abstract

Drama has traditionally been a vehicle for expressing patriarchal ideas that serve as a means of repression and enslavement. It has for long fed the idea of inequality among individuals and has created dysfunctional relationships. Variety of discourses, including drama have contested the ideas of female sexuality and identity creating disputes. Post-Independent playwrights have utilised these ideas of gender, sexuality and identity to reframe and reconstruct the preconceived ideals and images. Post-Independent playwrights have incorporated and used myths to challenge and disrupt these ideas where the superiority of one group of people or one half of the society lies in the inferiority of the other. Playwrights have now tried to decentre these existing centres. The Pavitrata Ideal of total devotion and submission to husband is resisted in Varsha Adalja's Mandodari, while Bhisham Sahni's Madhavi delicately questions the commoditization of women and the body politics ingrained in both society and literature. This paper attempts to explore Madhavi's and Mandodari's journey to eternity and the path they incorporated in order to regain their identity as an individual.

Introduction

Resistance and subjectivity has been the dominant notion considering the revisionist works and in these revisionist works there's an emphasis on the characters those were once sidelined. Following independence, the nationalist image was rebuilt through revisionist and revivalist methods. However, this goes beyond simple statist and patriotic construction; it also examines the methods used to establish a nation and the beginnings of the decolonization process. Concepts of gender and sexuality have been essential in the process of creating a nation. Given the Vedic era, patriarchy and male domination were not foreign to India; however, colonial interference was more decisive and has placed a clear cultural emphasis on the idea of the Indian woman. Thus creating an Indian woman who experiences much more oppression and marginalization. Because of independence, there was a rise in national identity, but in this process, women who had a larger role in this glorious past and who they looked to for defining the self or identity were somewhat forgotten and ignored. Therefore, it became crucial for post-independent post-colonialists to develop counter narratives to the prevailing state narrative and discourses for voices that were muted, silenced, unearthed, and maimed off while studying the mythological past. This means that the new discourses challenging "structural domination" pose a threat to the androcentric repressive system. Many writers used theatre or drama as a form to subvert these ideals such as Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* Varsha Adalja's Mandodari and Bhisham Sahni's Madhavi works on this monumental approach. Both of these writers have tried to decentre the dominant discourse and ideology clouding the social dialogue. In order to do so they have reinvented the story, redesigned it, renewed it and rediscovered it in order to provide voice and subjectivity to the once muted voices. This process included reframing and questioning existing discourses by

revising and restructuring old myths . Myths for long have been the patriarchal tool of subjugation that has rendered helpless the generations of women .Myth has been an instrument for creating a homogenized way of looking at women and their existence. It has also acted as a source serving for the marginalization of women. “Women manifest themselves in many different ways but each of the myths built around woman tries to summarize her as a whole” (Simone De Beauvoir *Second Sex*) . Myths dilute the image of women to weak, suppressed and inferior prototypes thus creating an essentialist image of woman and womanhood . Myths act as a reflection of the male world and the male psyche as they reflect the anxieties associated with male existence. Kate Millet in *On Lies , Secrets and Silence* has observed “Patriarchy has a still more tenacious and powerful holdthrough it’s successful habit of passing itself off as a nature” Therefore Mythology for long has been a systematic tool that has reinforced the idea of male superiority projecting women as man’s “other”. Reinterpretation of these myths has provided agency and much required space to these subaltern characters and voices. These texts act as a commentary on the socio-political condition of the world and the kind of treatment women are recipient of. These ideologies and hierarchies are challenged and displaced by a new set of ideals. The once colonized bodies of women are removed from their clutches by these subversive counter discourses. Socio cultural conditions are the governing factors that act as determiners of the life of women which has not only assigned roles to them but has also acted as a destructive force in their development. Post independent playwrights portrayed the struggle of women within and against social constraints with a desire for change. As a result these texts act as a form of protest and demands for an autonomy. The depiction of Mandodari by Varsha Adalja as a strong , fierce , brave , determined and ambitious character has one such goal . Similarly BhishamSahani has provided agency and space to Madhavi by offering her a choice at the end.

Literary review

Ancient texts and myths are re-read in the contemporary light to furnish the old archaic belief system and social setup. Bhisham Sahni and Varsha Adalja both wrote considering the Post independent India that was in a self destructive mode with its nationalistic models which completely sidelined the other half of population i.e. women as it failed terribly to provide them true sovereignty and freedom where the majority of the community was unrepresented. The concept of “New Woman” has ultimately reduced them to just bodies. Nationalism created this transcendental icon based on myths ceasing them of their rights. Drama has been used as a medium of expression to subvert these notions by equipping myths in the dramatical works . Varsha Adalja for an instance has adopted writing as a profession to talk about the dire state of women in society . Her works like *I Light My Own Candle , Trijokinaro and Menopause* revolves around the themes of the quest for self, sexual desires, self-exploration, self-discovery and self-introspection and exploration of bodily concerns of women . Varsha Adalja has questioned and challenged the victimized and dreadful state of women in Indian society. *Mandodari* challenges the dominant stereotypical notion that of dim witted ignorant women who lacks knowledge to that of Mandodari who is well versed, emotionally and intellectually sound and she is the one who has mastered the tactics of manipulation. She is the one who has challenged Kaaldevta in the game of chess by employing the strategy of Shaam Dam Dand Bhed. Bhisham Sahni on the other hand has excellently portrayed the condition of pre and post independent India. His works like *Tamas* and *Amritsar agya* shows the frenzied state of madness and instability. It further showcased the trauma of dislocation and displacement showing the dehumanized and disjointed sense of reality. Here the victim has turned into the victimizer and the abused has become the abuser. His work has focused on the suffering , trauma , torment, anguish , agony and humiliation of both men and women during partition. Bhisham Sahni’s *Madhavi* has adopted an account of Madhavi from Mahabharata who is the daughter of King Yayati and of Munikumar Galav who is the sishya of guru Vishwamitra and is given as a Daan.

Portrayal of Women in Myths

Women and their integrity has been undermined by essentialist gendered norms which has acted as a tool of enslavement by prescribing the roles and cares that both the genders should receive. Women are casted in peripheral roles where they are burdened under the narration of a chaste, virgin, obedient, selfless, sympathetic and self –sacrificing nature. These narrations have been incorporated into stories, folklore , epics and other genres `diminishing and lowering the status of women in society. The lives of mythical women like Ahilya , Anasuya , Sita and Ghandhari brings forth the observation of the Pavitrata Ideal, which adds unwanted strain to the female bodies . Virginity has been used as an ideological tool wherein women are cast-off and used as scapegoats for various forms of injustices that fall on women. This extra emphasis on the women’s body has facilitated the wrong ideas leading to the commodification of women as seen within the practices of Devdasi, Courtesan ,Mahari

in the state of Odisha , Devidishi in Kerala and Yellamma in Karnataka . It has even led to the exploitation of women either as harassment in workplace , rape and domestic abuse and as it is said most of the wars such as partition was won over the bodies of women.

When talking about the female characters in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, questions such as why Mandodari and Madhavi are always brought up . considering the sacrifices and adversities that Mandodari and Madhavi endured are beyond imagination as they were marginalized for a long time. They are granted and accorded a brief role or significance perhaps because their struggles would have cast a shadow over the patriarchal worldview or maybe because their bravery would have threatened the patriarchal standard. Their stories were stored in old boxes kept in some enigmatic place, and they were kept at boundaries, neglected and alienated to the point that they lived a lonely life as outcasts. Writing about them is similar to pulling out a drawer and opening the boxes ; it releases the sound and voices that have been choked, suppressed , stifled and restrained. Mandodari has been reduced to nothing more than the wife of Ravana and the daughter of Mayasura, the King of Asuras and Apsara Hema. It is easy to forget the hardships she endured during her journey and the trajectory of her life as a virtuous , truthful, wise woman who led her husband to the path of righteousness warning him against the Navagraha – a group of nine celestial bodies determining one’s fate in life. Mandodari is well known for being a brilliant dharma follower, yet this road ultimately left her desolate . Mandodari’s transformation from a frog into a lovely girl is described in the Uttar Ramayana , and her beauty is mentioned in the Valmiki Ramayana , where Hanuman once misidentifies her for Sita. Being one of the five Panchkanyas , Mandodari is revered as the destructor and destroyer of all the evil forces. We are given a situation in Assamese Ganakacharita where Mandodari must demonstrate her chastity and innocence. This demonstrates how she navigated the stormy dualistic life with a variety of experiences and insight.

In the *UdyogParva of Mahabharata* , Madhavi is presented to us who is daughter of King Yayati who is known for his charity. She is given as daan or traded to Guru Vishwamitra’s sishya Galav in order to fulfill his Gurudakshina comprising 800 Ashwamedha horses. She is one of the most obscure and least known characters in the Mahabharata as she is not recognized for the sacrifices she made. The path which Madhavi took to reach Atma-Bodha is one of willing participation, which leads her to personal growth and transformation in accordance with the Pavamana Mantras , such as “Asato ma Sadgamaya , Tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, Mrytor ma amrtamgamaya” which translates to “journey from the unawareness, ignorance , darkness to awareness, light and knowledge”. In return for 200 horses, Madhavi was given to three separate kings : King Ushinar of Bhoja , King Divodasa of Kashi, King Haryasva of Ayodha , and finally , Vishwamitra , the guru of Galav. Madhavi was herded from door to door , from man to man like a stray animal or a puppy werte she was separated from her newborn babies just after their birth. Madhavi’s condition is analogous or similar to that of Devaki who was separated from her son Krishna just after his birth. Madhavi has played a great role in carrying forward the royal dynasty and saving it from the extinction . These historical women lived lives of dignity and pride while facing innumerable changes and troubles. They did not let their personal tragedies to dismember or break them. Through the unpacking and unraveling of their hidden untold stories they were forced to cede their authority, this paper seeks to provide insight into the other side of the story. Their contributions are frequently underappreciated , disregarded , and taken for granted.

Madhavi and Mandodari as Pillars of Resistance and Female Agency

For a long time , writers and artists have used art as a means of resistance and subjectivity wherein their creations question the prevailing beliefs , social norms and political structure. The ultimate goal of art has turned into provoking critical thoughts or to bring change in readers or society at large . Many literary works focusing on resistance is produced in India against oppressive models such as colonialism , casteism and social injustice . Mulk Raj Anand’s “*Untouchable*” is a well known example as it deftly critiques the social hierarchy while revealing the dehumanizing effects of the caste system on Bakha , the protagonist. Arundhati Roy’s “*The God of Small Things*” is another example which defied the conventional norm and delved into the issue of forbidden love , Caste Prejudice and Political unrest in Kerala .Mahasweta Devi’s “*Draupadi*” and “*Mother of 1084*” addresses issues of marginalization, exploitation and sufferings of tribes. For an instance film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* has examined the lives of four women casted in different background defy Patriarchal standards and social expectations. It talks about female empowerment, agency and sexuality. Street theatre organizations like Jana Natya Manch have used plays to raise awareness about various social and political issues. Dramatists like Safdar Hashmi and Badal Sircar have tackled political issues and injustices in their plays . Sircar’s “*Evam Indrajit*” and

Hashmi's "*Halla Bol*" have questioned the social authority and promoted the social change. Numerous Indian Playwrights modify old myths and classical literature to mirror the social realities and difficulties of today. For instance, Vijay Tendulkar's "*Ghashiram Kotwal*" uses a historical Maratha figure to criticize abuse of power and political corruption.

There is a hint of subdued resistance in Bhisham Sahni's *Madhavi* where the author has incorporated myth in order to demystify the old discourse bringing forth the change without explicitly emphasizing opposition. Even though *Madhavi* was quiet most of the time, she resisted and changed the story by merely refusing to restore her youth and virginity. She came out for representation of number of women who submit or devote their lives in order to pursue the ideal of the virgin, pure and chaste woman. *Madhavi* has made an effort to lessen the weight or load on the shoulders of women, who are often treated or kept like a doormat in a society which is selectively blind for the other half of its population. Bhisham Sahni challenges the notion of inherently self-sacrificing nature of women where we are made aware of the tragic fate of *Madhavi* who is in a way abandoned by all those for whom she gave up her individuality, her freedom, her youth, her instinct as a mother and her subjectivity. Going back to forest is an act of self-acceptance and self-discovery where going back to nature is congruous to going back to your own self. Resistance doesn't necessarily have to be overt, it can rather question or raise issues such as whether the female body is merely a machine for bearing children, with the number of male heirs and chakravarty samrats it produces determining your place and importance.

Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari* elucidates the concept of resistance, *Mandodari* for long has been a silent character or referred just as the wife of Ravana from the epic *Ramayana*. *Mandodari*'s resistance takes on multiple forms and is shown in a variety of ways. *Mandodari* has affirmed her individuality and agency by defying cultural norms and patriarchal norms of her era. *Mandodari* doesn't reduce herself to a political pawn even though she is the queen of Lanka she will not play the role of a coward. Rather, she participates diligently in decision-making and defends her convictions. *Mandodari* challenges Ravana's authority and his deeds, especially his act of kidnapping Sita i.e. *Sitaharan*. She even subtly challenges his pursuit of power and his hunger for control. She confronts him about the repercussions of his acts and questions his choices, demonstrating her bravery and moral integrity. *Mandodari*'s love, empathy and compassion for others, particularly Sita, demonstrates her resistance and subjectivity. *Mandodari* understands Sita's pain and offers assistance to her in her hour of urgency and need, despite her personal agony and devotion to her husband. *Mandodari* stands against her own husband for justice and morality. She demonstrates her dedication to morality and fairness by acknowledging the injustices committed by her husband, Ravana and she worked to make amends. Considering every aspect *Mandodari*'s persona personifies the idea of rebelling against the injustice, oppression and despotism. "*Mandodari*" is an engrossing examination of empowered individual having strength and morality as she asserts her own agency and challenges the established power dynamics by her actions and perceptions.

Conclusion

Through their revisionist approaches, Bhisham Sahni and Varsha Adalja have attempted to reimagine and reorganize the preexisting discourses. These two plays have questioned the prevailing mindset, which has influenced how people perceive Indian women and their inherent qualities. By giving voice to the formerly silent characters, they also served as a vehicle for providing the agency to whole clan of women who are ignored or unrepresented. Furthermore, these subdued characters serve as a voice for a large number of real-life sufferers who lack a voice because they are either dehumanized or vilified by societal norms that pit them against the ideas of virginity, chastity, and fidelity. Theatre evolved as a vehicle or medium for challenging and altering the dominant notion and dominant discourses that governed the world of women. These plays demonstrate how Indian theatre has evolved and changed showing the shift in the trends of gender and sexuality. Myth has been employed as a tactic to challenge ideas of freedom, reason and oppression in the real world. Myth has subtly offered a glimpse of reality where *Mandodari*'s *Pavitrata* ideal and *Madhavi*'s virginal bounty serves as a mirror of the patriarchal world and its ill effects on the society. It demonstrates failure of nationalism and nationalistic ideals inability to speak out for women's rights and issues. It is an act of liberating the politically trivialized body from the politics and hegemony of power. *Madhavi*'s unwillingness to reclaim her virginity and her deliberate disappearance in the nature i.e. forest, together with *Mandodari*'s trick of *Shaam daam dand bhed* to manipulate *Kaaldevta* for the fulfillments of her needs and desires, are a potent and perceptive display of resistance against male chauvinistic ideals. Reinterpreting these myths aids in rescuing the contemporary audience and the modern world from the deceptive tutelage of reality. It also aids in the rationalization of youth and society by generating

discourses that serve as a counter narratives. These stories also serve as a counter history ,opening up new perspectives to the preexisting ideas.

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