

THE SISTER TEXTS AS ANTI- FOUNDATIONALISTS: AN ENQUIRY OF SELECT INDIAN ENGLISH PLAYS

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Abstract

The modern plays deconstruct the principles of Stone Age where in gender and caste discrimination was in practice. The modern playwrights rework on the established hegemony, presented in the epics and counter it. The present paper analysis the reworking of the epics presented in the modern plays. There are number of plays which make us to rethink about some episodes of the epics. The research paper has analyzes two plays, namely, *Five Lords, But None A Protector* and *The Sudraascetic* at a great length in order to study the presentation of caste and gender in the epics. The analysis brought the understanding that, women were silenced in the grand narratives. But a strong voice of dissent is seen in the modern literature. The little narratives become the voice of the women. An attempt to evaluate the presentation of caste is done in *The Sudraascetic*. Kuvempu restructures the epic in the play and uplifts humanity. The sister text also helps to understand the true human values.

Key words: The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, hegemony, sister narratives, grand narratives, little narratives, stone age, foundationalism.

India has the richest tradition of drama and theatre. Drama has always been a very vibrant form of literature. It has appealed to the class and the mass equally. The modern plays deconstruct the principles of Stone Age where in gender and caste discrimination was in practice. The modern playwrights rework on the established hegemony presented in the epics and counter it. The present paper analysis the reworking of the epics presented in the modern plays. There are number of plays which make us to rethink about the some episodes of the epics.

Before the paper take into consideration of the analysis of the modern plays it is necessary to know how the epics are narrated. The epic is a long narrative poem, elevated in style, and large in scope and effects. It is about the great deeds of great heroes. Epics usually deal with the heroes involved in the long voyager or fierce battles. An epic is also known as heroic poem. The epic occurs in almost all national cultures and commonly gives an account of national origins or enshrines ancient, heroic myths central to the culture. For the Indian culture at large, much the most influential epics are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Hence it is clear that the epics give priority to the grandness in class and mass. Obviously there is marginalization of the 'Other'. But the modern plays give importance for every creature and uplift their existence considering both in class and gender.

The modern plays which are the reworking of the epics try to throw light on the voiceless. Jaidev, the Indian critic describes the term 'Sister-Texts' in his introduction to the play *Madhavi*. These sister-Texts are the reworking of the epics, which have borrowed the source from the epic stories and contextualize them. The sister texts revisit the epic content and re-examine it. The concern of these reworked plays is to represent the suppressed voices and sufferings presented in the epics. The powerless are demeaned and degraded in the epics. "The modern sister-texts continually foreground the artificiality of this ideology and thus point to the possibility of its replacement by another that is less unjust and more equitable. These texts attempt to do this by introducing dialectic between the myth and what has been called the 'modern gaze' or the 'modern era'."¹⁰

The present paper analysis two plays, namely, Kuvempu's *The Shudraascetic* (translated from Kannada language by Dr. Prabhu Shankar) and Saoli Mitra's *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* (translated from Bengali by Rita Datta).

The Playwrights as Anti-foundationalists:

Anti-foundationalism is a term, which denotes rejection to foundationalist approach. (Philosophical theories of knowledge). "The Anti-foundalists challenge the grounds of someone's system of belief, or thought."¹¹ The playwrights question the foundationalist approach presented in the epics.

Kuvempu breaks the Aryan false foundationalism. He restructures the Shudra's character in order to uplift equality and humanity. In his play *The Shudra Ascetic* (the original title of the play in Kannada language is *Shudra Tapaswi*) Kuvempu takes liberty to alter the scene of Shudra's presentation as a sinner in the epic.

Kuvempu represents the Shudra as a great sage in his play. The play breaks the false notion of penance, which was believed as the right of the Aryan. The play had spread a sensation in the home state of Kuvempu when it was written in the colonial India. Kuvempu successfully transcends the message of humanity and equality through his play. By achieving this, Kuvempu not only becomes a playwright but also becomes a social reformer, social thinker and humanist.

The playwrights (in other words the plays as well) become antifoundationalists by breaking the issues of caste and gender related to the false foundation in the epics. Sometimes the playwrights take the freedom to create some new characters and thus restructure the epic stories. They send a new message of humanity and equality to the modern world. The women characters get a new identity in their plays. The plays break the hegemony of caste and gender presented in the epics. In this way, the plays become a major contribution to the 'Other', and give voice to the voiceless.

The stories of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the two great epics of India. The *Ramayana* is the Raman's story and the *Mahabharata* is the Pandava's story. These two epics celebrate the story of the heroes in the grand manner. In many sense these characters are praiseworthy for the brevity, moral conduct and promise they keep up. Because of which these two works are treated with great respect and honour in India and outside as well. However, selecting different episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and not treating them as continuous stories, one can diffuse the treatment of certain characters, especially women and Shudra characters, which have been marginalized and not given enough attention and importance in the epics. Draupadi, Seeta, Mandodhari, Urmila, Surpanakha, Draupadi, Madhavi, Vishakha, Nittlai, Shambooka, Karna are ill-treated because of their identity either as women or Shudras. These characters are subverted in the "Sister-Texts". The little narratives look at the story through women and Shudras perspective. The plays were not mere subversions, but a feminist and Shudra reinterpretation of the epic characters is done. These characters in the modern plays protest against the marginalization, ignorance and humiliation they have faced.

The play, *Five Lords, Yet None A Protector* shows how queens are treated as prisoners in their own palaces. They were confined to the bed rooms and their voice hardly came out of it. The bindings that the women were subjected made them passive participants in the decision-making, despite their being queens. Kathak: ...A queen- yet not a queen. An empress- yet not an empress. Mistress of a kingdom. Yet a queen without a kingdom. The tale of a hapless woman who had everything yet nothing.ⁱ

The Swayamvara was the construction of the male society. The king used to decide who his daughter should marry. The Swayamvara is also a gender dominating practice of the then society, where the fathers the bridegrooms for the princess. The swayamvara was a practice to keep up class, race and gender hierarchy. Masculinity was celebrated over a princess in the swayamvara. A woman is presented as an object for sale, where the royal highness of men is presented. The man's ego of conquering a woman is presented in the swayamvara. The ideology of dominance of man that he will conquer, slip on the Garlands, grab the bride and Drag her off with him was presented in a heroic manner.

Five Lords, Yet None A Protector, presents Draupadi's sufferings in the epic. She suffers humiliations (as a daughter) in the swayamvara, as a wife she suffers when she was used in the gambling, as a queen she suffers when she dishonoured at the court. Later she suffers as a mother when she loses her five kids at the end of Kurukshetra war. Draupadi's sacrifice is greater than any Pandava. Nevertheless, she is victimized for being a woman and she does not receive significance compared to the male characters. As the consequences of the Pandava's love of gambling and the Kaurava's lust for power Draupadi is attacked repeatedly. The men are always silent about her humiliation. In the court when she is a queen, her husbands use her as a pawn and in the exile she is tried to seduce by Jayadrata, Keechaka. The play makes us aware of contemporary social issues by contextualizing the plot of the epic.

Countering the Hegemony of Caste:

Kuvempu, the greatest writer in Kannada literature has declared a war against the caste discrimination. He has objected the superstition and narrow mind in forming the hierarchy in the caste system. Kuvempu is still relevant because he has not only pointed out his contemporary social condition but has also countered the caste hierarchy system.

The play *The Shudraascetic* is a message to the modern world in understanding the Shastras and Vedas properly. The Varnasrama has constructed the profession of a person based on his work. But the profession was decided on the basis on one's birth. The birth has victimized the downtrodden, which Kuvempu brings out in his play. In the *Ramayana*, Shambooka was not allowed to penance. It is questioned and recreated by Kuvempu. The designations/works were depending on the basis of birth. Hence, the society constructed the knowledge system on the basis of birth. Knowledge rules the power. Thus the power was hidden with the construction of the caste system

The sister-texts counter the presentation of injustice in terms of race, caste and gender, thus, try to bring out the truth. They interrogated epic in order to question the discrimination of Caste and Gender. The false construction of knowledge system through penance is countered in the play.

The performance of penance was believed as a way to acquire the knowledge. At the same time penance was believed to be the right of the Aryans. In the *Ramayana*, the Aryan king Rama kills Shambooka, a Shudra for performing penance. A Brahmin goes to Rama and accuses him for ignoring the penance of the Shudra. The Brahmin puts his arguments on the basis of Shastras and Vedas and asks Rama to kill the Shudra for his act of penance. By listening to the Brahmin Rama kills Shambooka. Rama's act of killing a Shudra is presented as protection of Dharma. It was the construction of the dominant class that upheld the injustice as Dharma. The epic narrates the injustice of the protection of Dharma.

The play evaluates the epic and restructures it. The play breaks the mindset of the dominant class that has made to believe that nature is, their property, and it also does not accept a Shudra's penance. Bhairava, the protector of forest says,

Bhairava: How rude is this Goddess of nature to-day! Without paying the regard due to yogi Sambuka, The austere asceticⁱⁱ

The play reveals the false ideologies in the epic, that even nature does not agree with a Shudra's meditation and it also shows its rudeness. The identity of a man with respect to his birth is presented as the justice and the victimizer should obey it. The play examines the epic presentation. Bhairava's words make us to think that on whose favour the Nature was rude. It was believed that, the nature, air, wind, river are the sacred constructions of the God and the Brahmin have the supreme authority over the God's creation, because they consider themselves near to God. The play re-visits the epic and counters it. 'Death' breaks the false ideology of the Vedic practice of penance and says to Bhairava,

'Death'.... As the behest of the Goddess of Dharma,

It is to save the honour of sage Shambhuka

That I have come here

You are but his body-guard;

But I am the guard of his very self-respect!ⁱⁱⁱ

The play uplifts the Dharma and represents Shambooka as the self-respectful man. 'Death' says that it was in the forest to save Shambooka because he is the man with Dharma. The epic presents Shambooka as

‘aadharmi’, because he is a Shudra and committed the sin by performing penance. In the epic ‘Death’ stretches its arms towards Shambooka and take him with it. The play values the virtue of Dharma in the epic. The play presents equality and self respect. The play sensitively protests against racial discrimination. In the epic the Brahmin are presented as the only protectors of Dharma, because they have the knowledge of Shastras and Vedas. But the play examines the meaning of Dharma and brings out, that Dharma lives with everyone and Shambooka is a 'Dharmatma' and his honor should be protected ‘Death’ says that it is his duty to protect Shambooka because he was performing penance. The ‘Voice’ of ‘Death’ is the protest against the epic presentation of Killing of Shambooka.

The play interrogates the misinterpretation of Dharma, penance and God. It counters accusing Shambooka against his penance; Bhairava calls it the sin to take the life of a Brahmin who disrespected Shambooka.

Bhairava: - God, O God! What a terrible sin has occurred

In this Land of righteousness

Ruled over by SriRama himself!^{iv}

Bhairava objects Death’s decision of taking a Brahmin boy’s life. He opines it is because of the penance by a Shudra that nature has also become rude over the penance. Bhairava calls the kingdom of Rama as the kingdom of justice. Bhairava opines, when the nature itself showed its rudeness about a Shudra meditation, then it will be a sin to take a life of a Brahmin boy, who has disrespected a Shudra. Bhairava calls the Shudra’s penance a sin. Bhairava is surprised to see a Shudra meditating. ‘Death’ comes to take the life of a Brahmin, because he has dishonored a sage Shambooka. ‘Death’ wishes to uphold the universal Dharma by taking away the life of the Brahmin, who has dishonored the Brahmin. But Bhairava upholds the practice of Varnashrama and justifies the discrimination of caste. Bhairava calls it a terrible sin. His words bring out the righteousness and power. The right to power, knowledge, and penance was rested with the dominant.

The play brings out equality in human beings. It upholds Shudra as a sattvic (noble). It also counters the inhumanity in killing Vali. The play amplifies significance for Shambooka and Vali’s life. It evaluates the epic and the Vedas. The play makes an observation of the Vedas and the Shastras and evaluates how they have been misread and misinterpreted.

The play reveals how the penance becomes more liberal for and knowledge has not remained the rights of one class. The Brahmin’s words prove that, age by age, the penance and knowledge become the property of

the achiever with ability. The play amplifies the liberty in knowledge system. The play breaks the hegemony and brings out the misinterpretation of the shastras and Vedas by the dominant ideology. The Brahmin puts before us how the knowledge spreads age by age. It also brings out how the meaning of sacredness and holiness has coined by the shastras and Vedas. Milk is always pure and sacred. There is no discrimination. Likewise, penance and knowledge are same for all. Whether a Shudra meditates or a Brahman; both are going to acquire the same knowledge. There is no discrimination in knowledge. But the Vedic society tried to break the sacredness of knowledge. It has misled the society on the basis of varnashrama. The Brahmin brings out the hegemony of the Brahmanism in spreading the misconception of the Shatras and the Vedas.

The research paper has analyzes the two plays, namely, *Five Lords, But None A Protector* and *The Sudraascetic* at a great length in order to study the presentation of caste and gender in the epics. The analysis brought the understanding that, women were silenced in the grand narratives. But a strong voice of dissent is seen in the modern literature. The little narratives become the voice of the women. An attempt to evaluate the presentation of caste is done in *The Sudraascetic*. Kuvempu restructures the epic in the play and uplifts humanity. The chapter also helps to understand the true human values.

End notes:

ⁱMitra, Saoli. *Five Lords, Yet None A Protector*. Trans. Rita Datta. Kolkata: Stree, an imprint of Bhatkal and Sen, 2006. P. 4. Print.

ⁱⁱ Kuvempu. Ramakrishna, R. Ed. *Alchemy of Creativity: Twelve Plays of Kuvempu*. Prabhu Shankara. The Shudra Ascetic. Trans. Mysore: Kuvempu Kavyadhyayana Peetha: Kuvempu Institute of Kannada Studies, 2014. P.10. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kuvempu. Ramakrishna, R. Ed. *Alchemy of Creativity: Twelve Plays of Kuvempu*. Prabhu Shankara. The Shudra Ascetic. Trans. Mysore: Kuvempu Kavyadhyayana Peetha: Kuvempu Institute of Kannada Studies, 2014. P.14. Print.

^{iv} Kuvempu. Ramakrishna, R. Ed. *Alchemy of Creativity: Twelve Plays of Kuvempu*. Prabhu Shankara. The Shudra Ascetic. Trans. Mysore: Kuvempu Kavyadhyayana Peetha: Kuvempu Institute of Kannada Studies, 2014. P.16. Print.

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