

A NEW HISTORICAL CRITICISM OF THE HEROINES IN INDIAN DRAMA

Ms. A. Rajina Banu
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,
Alagappa University,
Karaikudi – 3

Abstract

Literature and history are inseparable as the influence of the one on the other is perennial. History of the past shapes the present Literature and it runs into the making of the future history in turn. The literary artist also either deliberately or inadvertently responds to the contemporaneous events of significance and also to the ideas prevalent in his or her society. Hence, theorizing the literature of all ages from historic view becomes a prudent choice. Drama, being the genre of humanity, records the socio-economic-political changes that changed the thematic convergence of modern literature. By realistically depicting the whole gamut of life, it stirred up the emergence of several theories such as feminism, eco-feminism, gender-criticism, humanism, etc. This article focuses on studying the evolution of the theory of Indian feminism in the backdrop of new-historicism. And, it also illustrates how this approach helps in the comprehensive understanding of the status of women as portrayed in Indian English Drama.

Keywords: Women in Drama, Indian Feminism, Pre-Colonial and Post-colonial phases, New Historicist Approach, etc.

A nation without literature cannot have a registered history of its own. History, if recorded in words becomes literature. For, literature recreates reality, reflects humanity, and reveals the past. To emphatically state, it has refined the prehistoric cavemen into modern men of letters. An art generally bears its origin from the three interrelated sources: an artist's individual perception of life and humanity, a country's cultural condition, and the society's endemic folkways. Hence, the interpretation and evaluation of an art cannot be genuine in the absence of historical references. This condition applies to all research arenas so does literary arts. Indian Drama as a literary art is neither an imitation nor a borrowed tradition, but an indigenously Indian. No other culture can be paralleled with India except Greece in this respect. Dr. Horace H. Wilson's words "whatever may be the merits or defects of the Hindu dramas, they were unmixedly its own (xi)" and Dr. Ward's observation: "There is no real evidence for assuming any influence of Greek

example upon the Indian Drama at any stage of its progress” (Rao 183) falsifies the claim that Indian drama bears affinity to Greek tradition.

The comprehensive study of Sanskrit plays and the Western dramas in parallel started with only the publication of William Jones’ translation of *Sakuntala* by Kalidasa in 1789. The modern critics of dramatic literature are of the view it was then that the Greek literature had penetrated into India. Bhasa or Bharata’s name is traditionally ascribed to the nomenclature ‘father of Indian drama’, though there is considerable confusion over the authorship of classic plays. It was, perhaps, because of the ancient Indian custom which attributes a literary work to the ruler or aristocrat under whose patronage the real dramatist chanced to compose and perform plays. For instance, the anonymous earliest extant stage piece *The Little Clay Cart* (400 A.D) is ascribed to Sudraka, the emperor. Thus the study of Indian drama in the backdrop of new historicist approach reveals many unknown facts.

New Historicism, a combined and up-graded theory of historical and biographical studies, formulated by Stephen Greenblatt in his essay “Towards a Poetics of Culture” calls for the interpretation of the cryptic details of the Renaissance texts. It gained recognition in 1980s with the publication of his, “Renaissance Self Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare.” Jonathan Goldberg, Jean Howard, Edward Pechter, Catherine, Louis A. Montrose and D. A. Miller are some other notable theorists who popularized the theory of New Historicism. The new historicists are of the view that severing a work of art totally from its historical and biographical overtones is impossible. They argue, literature is a faithful record of man’s origin and evaluation, his interests and inclinations, his feelings and emotions, his failures and frustrations, his temperament and behaviour, right from his birth at Eden to death on earth; because, man creates literature and vice versa. And, the critical study of a work of art in the light of modernists theories, such as new historicism, formalism, structuralism or deconstructionism which emphasis the exclusion of external values and the close textual reading of a text, poses the risk of losing those intrinsic meanings that are implicitly embedded by the extrinsic factors.

That sort of critique, New Historicists opine, cannot be a comprehensive one; and the preview of the contemporary historical conditions i.e. time, place, circumstances, cultural and social values is requisite for the proper interpretation of a text. To comparatively present, New Historicism is the study of a literary text in the light of socio-linguistic-political-cultural-religious history, conventions, and tradition of the nation and psychological, habitual, personal tendencies of the artist, whereas old historicism limits itself to demonstrating how a work reflects its time. As the focus of the paper is presenting a cohesive criticism of women in Indian drama, the researcher attempts to present her views from new-historicist perspective which offers a substantial method to the study of literature. It provides an overview of women characters in drama and the influence of history over the dramatization from the era of Panini to the Post-modern The close study of women characters in Indian drama which has myriad dimensions such as Vedic period, Era of Bhasa or Bharata, Century of Srichaitanya, Sanskrit drama, Bengali Drama (Jatra), Hindi drama, folk drama, amateur drama, drama in English translation, and Indian English drama etc. offers a multitude of models for womanhood.

This kind of study reveals how the Indian dramatic literature which closely follows social philosophy has been the major art form to depict the Indian life and history. To example some, Bhasa Plays, Kalidasa Plays, Buddhist plays, and other regional folk dramas of the pre-colonial India profoundly reflect the social philosophy or the history upon which the religious-caste-gender-political system is based. These dramas written in the light of Hindu mythology attest how women were discriminated in the name of religious codes. They help the critics to

categorize women into three models: the ideal type which dictates how the woman ought to be – Parvathi, an another half of man (Religious Drama); the existing form which emphasis how women should behave – Sita, all sacrificing (Sanskrit Plays); and the expected sort which portrays how women are viewed –New woman who enjoys equality (Modern Indian Drama). Thus, the Indian drama takes the privilege of prescribing models after the turn of Dharmis, Shastras, Vedas and Upanishads. Hence, Indian dramatic literature cannot be simply defined as social document. It encompasses the ever-changing religious, mythical, social, political, cultural, traditional, conventional facets and convincingly bridges how the past has gone into the creation of the present.

The postcolonial critics usually hold the view that women are the victims of Hindu religion; and they quote from the religious texts – *Manusmirti* and *Puranas*; Indian classics – the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* to attest their assertion. Contemning the entire dharma on the grounds of these pedantic criticism, though they undoubtedly postulate such gender-discriminatory ideas, might not be entertained without studying the Hindu metaphysics – mythology, religious theory, *dharma shastras*, *Vedantas* together. To state emphatically, women are neither differentiated nor defamed not only by Hinduism but also by Islam and Christianity, the other existing religions in India. From the scriptures such as *Brihadaranyak Upanishads* which says that man and woman are the two forms of the God; *Hadhees* which emphasis that women are in no way inferior to men; *The Bible* which demands that God blessed men and women equally, it is obvious that the theories of gender-difference, inequality and oppression are not formulated by religions or gods. To quote from R. C. Dutta's *History of Civilization of Ancient India*,

Women were honoured in ancient India, more perhaps than among any other ancient nation on the face of the globe. They were considered the intellectual companions of their husbands ... affectionate helpers in the journey of life, and ... inseparable partners in their religious duties (Qtd. in Prasad and Malik 124).

Even the ancient Indian drama which has much affinity with the religious scriptures and the then regional-ethical-cultural dramatic traditions impersonates women of composite sorts, temperaments, qualities, and tendencies as they are. It is inferable from this perplexing background that every research carried out on the status of Indian women without abiding by the new historicist rules would lead to partial criticism. To example from old epic dramas, *Brahmana* speaks that under no circumstance, women should be humiliated or killed; from the episode of Asur Baka in the *Mahabharata*, it is clear that even the *asuras* dared not to kill women; but Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana* kills Tadaka to save *rishis* and their *yajna*. Some other ancient plays attest that women are never punished, agonized, trailed even when they have committed an unpardonable sin. Reviewing the classic literature from new historicist point of view helps one in understanding how the practices of *Sati*, *devadasi*, gender-discrimination, female-infanticide, child marriage, polygamy and other patriarchal beliefs and perceptions came into existence.

Indeed, the word *Sati* stands for 'chaste woman' in Hindi and 'good woman' in Sanskrit. It designates originally the pious woman rather than the rite of immolation. But how it got transformed into mean *Sativrata* or *Satimata* remains obscure. To address the perennial issues of gender-discrimination,

Women during the early Vedic period enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such

as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early *Vedic* period. *Rigvedic* verses suggest that women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their own husbands. Scriptures such as the Rig Veda and *Upanishads* mention several women sages and seers, notably Gargi and Maitreyi. (“Women in India”).

The dramatic literature of the colonial period evidences that their status deteriorated after the Muslim conquest that brought *purdah* system to Indian society. The term, *Devadasi* originally refers to those women who dedicate their whole life to the service of deity or a temple after the *pottukattu* ceremony. To define, *devadasi* means ‘the worshiper (*dasa* or *dasi*) of God (*deva*)’. They learned the classical arts, *sadir* (*Bharatanatya*), *ragas* and *svaras*, as dance and music were essential parts of Indian way of worshiping. They enjoyed relatively high status in society; they had children from their husbands who taught them these fine arts. During British rule, when the temple arts became obsolete, they lost patronage and got physically exploited by those colonizers. Colonial views of *devadasi* as prostitute are hotly disputed even now.

For instance, the Hindus started the system of child marriage to save their girl children from the lustful eyes of colonial officers. This statement gets authenticity when referred to the texts such as *Two Leaves and a Bud* by Mulk Raj Anand in which Sajani and Leela are subjected to rape by British soldiers. Curiously enough, the word dowry or bride price refers to the payment of groom to the bride’s parents for marrying off their daughters. But it was also manipulatively misread and claimed by grooms for accepting women as wives. According to UNFPA, female-infanticide, gender-discrimination, child marriage and polygamy are indeed the result of economic and political issues such as poverty, unemployment, persecution, forced migration, slavery, social pressure and parental sense of production along with dowry. To example, the regional dramas produced after 1890s such as *Balidan*, (Bengali); *Hara-Gauri* (mythological drama), *Sirajaddaula* and *Mr. Kasim*, (historical plays) *Sasti ki Santi* (social play) efficaciously deal with the evils of female-infanticide, dowry-system, Child-marriage, and the questions of widow-remarriage, women education, women rights etc.

To talk about the existing views which claim that Sita of the *Ramayana* was left to go through the ordeal of fire bath; Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* was publicly mortgaged and humiliated; Shakuntala of *Abhijnan Shakuntalam* was cursed and repudiated for no major fault of her; and all these show how women are victimized at the hands of men and patriarchal society. Here, the intensive study of their male counterparts should be done before passing judgments. Rama (wages a war with Ravana), Arjuna (War of Pandavas) and Dushyanda (repent intensely at knowing the truth) avenge or are avenged for unjustly punishing women at the denouement. Hence, it is obvious that the socio-cultural-political representation or the reinterpretation of women as inferior gender is not in accordance with the religious scriptures. It is indicated by some feminists that apart from Sanskrit or religious dramas, regional and folk dramas also presented women from male perspective.. The major women characters in these medieval dramas are always meek, submissive, mute and sacrificing. Indeed, neither the playwrights are the supporters of patriarchy not they encouraged women subjugation. Perhaps, they would have tried to portray the social realities in their plays - *Devadas and Parvati* drama, for example.

The study of Indian drama in translation provides instances to this argument. The regional writers revolutionized the Indian theatre by enacting plays with full of controversial themes and plots and voiced for the rights of women, the most repressed. The unbiased study of Bengali, Marathi, Kannada and Hindi plays, especially of Micheal Madusudan Dutta (*Tilottama*) Girish Chandra Ghose (*Maukulamanjari*) Rabindranath Tagore (*Rakta Karabi*), Badal Sarkar (*Shesh*

Nahi), Satish Alekar (Begam Barve), Mahesh Elkunchwar (*Sonata*), Vijay Tendulkar (*Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe*), T. P. Kailasam (*The Purpose*) Girish Karnard (*Nagamandala*), Mohan Rakesh (*Aadha Adhure*), Shanta Gandhi (Jasma Odan), Habib Tanvir (*Manglu Didi*) proposes the fact how the religious customs and social codes were manipulatively misread to suit the Indian patriarchal ways. The above mentioned plays called for the redefinition of womanhood which was derogatorily misread by the then society.

The Indian English Drama which evolved under the British influence got enriched with Western concept of dramatization. Although the pre-Independence Indian English plays are notable for their poetic excellence, thematic variety, technical virtuosity, symbolic significance and commitment to propagate humane and moral values; they received not such a response from the Indian audience as the post-Independence English drama did. But the feminist consciousness was at peak in such plays. For instance, Sri Aurobindo, the mystic playwright of pre-Independence India says, “After I knew that God was a woman, I learned something from far-off about love; but it was only when I became a woman and served my Master and Paramour that I knew love utterly (“On Women: From Writings of Sri Aurobindo...”). He criticizes that,

The mediaeval ascetics hated women and thought they were created by God for the temptation of monks. One may be allowed to think more nobly both of God and of woman. If a woman has tempted thee, is it her fault or thine? Be not a fool and a self-deceiver... (“On Women: From Writings of Sri Aurobindo...”).

Among the most influential English playwrights of the post-Independence India, Harindranath Chattopadhyay (*The Parrot*), Asif Currimbhoy (*The Clock*), Pradap Sharma (*A Touch of Brightness*) Roysten Abel (*The Spirit of Anna Frank*), Mahesh Dattani (*Tara*), are some notable writers who voiced for the emancipation of women.

Yet the Indian theatres of the past and present have been criticized for ascribing secondary role to women. For instance, in Sanskrit plays, women characters were allowed not to speak much. The dramatists even while writing plays used *Sanskrit* dialogue for men, the aristocratic tongue and *prakrit* for women, vernacular dialect, to impose inferiority. Obviously, it has not held adequate space for women to express themselves. Mostly, it remained a male preserve. Hence, the commoditized and categorized representation of women has continued, though the objective was to foreground women as subjects. The change came after 1970s. Women characters were no longer played the conventional roles designated by male writers, they become protagonists. Even women started composing plays. These modern playwrights’ response to the Western feminist theatre reflected in their writings. They wrote to deconstruct sexual differences, undermine patriarchal power, and portray women as woman with equal rights.

In their pursuance of feminist identity, they questioned male dominated discourses and challenged institutions of patriarchy that force the subjugation of women. They drew upon the consciousness rising of women, brought feminine awareness, objected constructing women characters as cultural objects. Their plays portrayed woman from multiple socio-cultural-contextual dimensions that differentiated one from the other, as they strived to present varied women experiences, aspirations, frustrations etc. They reinvented history, mythology, folk themes and the past accounts of life and society and reinterpreted them from women’ point of view. Thus the dramaturgical innovations and the thematic concerns of Indian women theatre practitioners have constructed a theatre of their own that speaks for women from humanistic perspective. The plays of Bharati Sarabhai (*Two Women*), Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal (*Princess Kalyani*), Dina Mehta (*Brides are not for Burning*), Shree Devi Singh (*The Purple*), Polie

Sengupta (*Mangalam*), Manjula Padmanabhan (*Lights Out*) can be quoted as examples. Thus the new historicist approach which ‘textual-ize the history and historicize the text provides ample scope for comprehending the complex status ascribed to Indian women.

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