

Gender issues discussed in Sri Lankan and Indian plays: Special reference to Edirivira Sarachchandra's '*Maname*' and Jaishankar Prasad's '*Dhruvasvamini*'.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine how gender issues were discussed by two different South Asian play writers through their plays: '*Maname*' and '*Dhruvasvamini*'. Secondary research objectives are to examine their different approaches to solve above discussed gender issues as well as to examine the use of Buddhist concepts in the discussion of above endeavor. Edirivira Sarachchandra is a significant Sri Lankan dramatist who wrote '*Maname*' (1956) to critique gender-relations in Sri Lankan society. Jaishankar Prasad is an Indian writer who wrote the play '*Dhruvasvamini*' to criticize gender issues of Indian society. Literature survey has been conducted to analyze the plays. The outcome of this paper would be an exploration of gender issues discussed in Sinhala and Hindi dramas.

Keywords: Gender issues, Sinhala drama, Hindi drama, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Gender is not a biological aspect, but a social concept which has been used to prove the superiority of one sex over another. Men are naturally believed to be strong and aggressive but women are loving and peaceful. South Asian countries like India and Sri Lanka have a patriarchal society which gives priority to men so that women have been discriminated. Hence, it is evident that there are similarities between these two societies. This paper attempts to study how these gender issues were discussed in two different plays written by two writers from India and Sri Lanka.

'*Maname*' is a Sri Lankan drama written by Edirivira Sarachchandra who was influenced by folk dramas and Buddhist *Jathaka stories*. '*Maname*' play is a hybrid version of *Nadagam* and *Jathaka stories* which emphasize the capriciousness of women. Ancient Sri Lankan society considered women as treacherous, fickle, and short sighted beings who should be always kept under the power and supervision of men. Folk dramas and *Jathaka stories* were written to promote this belief. '*Maname*' was influenced by '*Culla Dhannuddara Jathaka*' which was about female infidelity. Sarachchandra wanted to establish a new definition for the women's role in the society. He wrote '*Maname*' in a critical way to lure the rationalism of readers. Jaishankar Prasad is a great Indian dramatist who worked on historical dramas. Though Prasad belongs to the Romantic period of Hindi Literature (1920-1936) he tried to start a discussion in the society on gender issues and women's position among men to make a social reform. Instead of environment, mysticism and beauty he has selected feminism, gender issues, and social realism in his play '*Dhruvasvamini*'.

2. Theoretical framework

For the present study, Sri Lankan play '*Maname*' and Indian play '*Dhruvasvamini*' have been used as a primary resource. Literature survey has been employed to analyze these two plays. Gender plays a vital role in feminism. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary (2005), gender is "the fact of being male or female" (p.664).

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However, sex is equated with biological differences and gender deals with social and cultural differences. Judith Butler is a great feminist who worked on gender issues. According to her study *Gender Trouble* (as cited in Stephen Morton, 2003), "the predominant understanding of sex as a biological category, which is *prior* to social and cultural influence, ignores how sex can *only* be made intelligible through the dominant discourses of medicine and the church, as well as the family and educational institutions". Butler highlights that gender differences are made by society in order to create limitations in gender roles, especially in women's role so that men could have a control over them. Butler criticizes on Beauvoir's argument on woman in her study *Simone de Beauvoir witness to a century* (1986) as follows:

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" – Simone de Beauvoir's formulation distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired. The distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the long-standing feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny; *sex* is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas *gender* is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation." (p.35) There is a debate on gender and sex identities. There is a clear definition for this in Anne Oakley's study *Sex, Gender and Society* (as cited in Christine Delphy, 2005) which was published in 1972. "Sex" is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. "Gender" however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into "masculine" and "feminine." (p.33)

Delphy highlights that, Oakley's concept of gender covers all the social and cultural differences between men and women. She emphasizes that all the psychological differences between sexes are based on social conditions. It is expected to examine how these concepts were affected to the discussions of relationship between gender and approaches in two different plays from two different countries.

3. Literature review:

In the introduction of the *Maname* (2006), Sarachchandra mentions that "I wanted to portray princess as an innocent woman. She was shocked and couldn't decide anything because of the unexpected incident. At that moment, only *Vedda King* was there to help her. So she just wanted to be closer and familiar to him." (p. 16) According to Kumarasinghe, K.(2005), "Sarachchandra did not abide by the original "*Culla Dhanuddhara*" story which reveals woman's infidelity. Instead, Sarachchandra portrayed a subtle definition of a depicted as an illusion that hinders man's deliverance. A remarkable feature in *Maname* is the effort to define this conventional view of women, in a subtle way" (p.83). Jayasinghe, S.(2013) compares *Maname* play with other *Jataka stories* and *Maname Kavi Nāḍagama In Retrospect 1956-2013* follows: While *Sanda Kinduru Jathakaya* was about female fidelity, *Culla Danuddhara Jatakaya*, the original source of the plot in *Maname*, was about female infidelity. In the *Jataka* story, the women are naturally an object of censure. The *Maname Kavi Nāḍagama* that followed the *Jataka* story was an unmitigated abuse of the princess. However, the *Maname* of Sarachchandra had no interesting in the infidelity issue, which in any case ceased' to be sacrosanct. But in my opinion Sarachchandra did not merely wanted to highlight the issue of infidelity, but also tried to discuss the psychology of men towards women. (p.47-51)

Jayasinghe emphasizes that Sarachchandra tries to discuss the psychology of men towards women. However, I would like to mention that vision of Sarachchandra goes beyond that and he tries to discuss not only the mentality of men towards women, but also he tries to discuss psychology of men towards men and their masculinity. Dayapala Jayanetti is another scholar who worked on *Maname*. In his book *Maname Natakaya Pilibanda Vivaranayak* (2006), he discusses the psychology of princess:

The way of presenting dramatic situation in a psychoanalytic manner is very articulated. Princess did not see her marriage life in the combat between two brave kings, but she saw the courage, confidence, and masculinity in them. She was a girl who rose under the shelter of her beloved father. Now she is confused with the beauty and violence of the forest. Therefore, there is no such atmosphere to think about her household life. Hence, according to her vision, her husband, and the forest chief who engaged fight with him, both are brave personalities. So she felt petty for *Vedda King* when he asked sword to cut off the neck of forest chief. (p. 64) It is clear that Jananetti is also criticizes the vision of Sarachchandra's towards gender issues discussed in this play. Many scholars have worked on the Hindi play '*Dhruvsvamini*'. Among them Nagendra gets a significant place.

According to Nagendra (2009), "*Dhruvasvamini* is an excellent play of Prasad. Basically it is a historical play, which portrays a most sensitive moment of Indian history. But it is more important as a 'Problematic Play'. Matter of divorce and re-marriage has been successfully raised through this play" (p.551).

Narayana (1981) makes explicit gender issues involved in the play '*Dhruvasvamini*' as follows:

Dhruvasvamini is a significant departure. The play is designed for a realistic stage presentation obviously under the influence of Ibsen. There is yet another aspect which makes it a bold experiment. So far, the kings and queens were painted with usual colours. For the first, time the author moves towards a deeper probe between the relations of a husband and wife. *Dhruvasvamini* is the wife of an ineffective and effeminate king. She is attracted to her brother-in-law who has all the manly qualities. A love triangle of this type had not appeared in Hindi drama earlier. (p. 58)

In the same Pota (1987), highlight issues related to '*Dhruvasvamini*' as follows:

Prasad was convinced of the need for the emancipation of woman. At national scene, Gandhi and a number of other modernist gave a call to the women to cast off their old beliefs, superstitions and participate in the freedom movement. Prasad did not consider woman as a dumb-driven cattle to be moved by the decisions of man. The practice of not divorcing the husband in the higher strata and high castes Hindus was not acceptable to the author. He even stands for the queen to desert the king if the latter proves to be nothing of a courageous and manlike person. (p. 344) It is clear that most of the scholars highlighted that Sarachchandra wanted to challenge the belief; fickleness of women. Many Indian scholars did not discuss the influence of Buddhist concepts in the discussion of gender issues on '*Dhruvasvamini*'. Hence, it is expected to pay more attention to the discussion of the behavior of male characters in '*Maname*' and the Buddhist concepts used in '*Dhruvasvamini*'.

4. Discussions:

4.1 The story of '*Maname*' as follows:

Prince Maname, son of the king of Banaras goes to study martial arts at Takshila. Being the best pupil of the master, he is given the title of *Dhanuddhara*. Master of Takshila was pleased about his talents and gave his daughter in marriage to Maname. On their way back to Banaras, they enter a forest where prince and princess Maname encounter a hunter king (Vedda) and his train. However, she is a married woman hunter king wanted to possess her and finally they began to fight for princess. Before fighting commenced, prince Maname gave his sword to his beloved wife. He succeeded in knocking down the hunter king and asks for the sword to destroy the evilness. Princess could not take a sudden decision on this occasion and asked not to kill him. Prince could not believe that and he was shocked at the moment and hunter king snatched the sword from princess and killed Maname. Though she was worried a lot she confessed her love to Vedda king; the hunter feared that if she killed her husband for lust and sexual attraction she would do the same thing to him. He abandoned princess in the forest and went away. Princess could not bear it and she died with broken heart in the middle of the forest.

In south Asian society men believed to be strong, aggressive and an ideal character. In the starting of the play writer creates the character of prince Maname according to above beliefs. Men always wanted to be brave in front of women, so they never bothered about women's sense of cautiousness which leads to many conflicts between them. Princess of Sarachchandra's play led a comfortable life under the shelter of master Rajaguru, who had come to an unknown forest with her husband. It is natural that she hesitates about the protection of both of them. Hence, prince Maname conveys her fearful feeling about the situation to her husband whom considered being genius in martial arts. Though princess conveys her fearsome feelings to Maname he does not heed his wife's sensible cautiousness as he was over confident about himself.

Kumarā: Veddān āpasu ethiyi mama nosithami sondura, Ēth āwoth, obata anathurak wannata ida nodemi... Mage nama Dhanuddara bawa amathaka nokaranu sondura. (Sarachchandra, 2006, p.26) (Prince: I don't think that hunter train will come back again my love, but if they come, again I am not going to let you any harm from them. My love, don't forget that my name is *Dhanuddhara*.)

Writer shows how over confidence of men leads the whole family to danger. He emphasizes the tension between princess and prince which is a symbolic tension between two genders. Character of hunter king (Vedda) has

been created to criticize barbarian qualities of uncivilized men in the society. There are some norms which have been accepted by the civilized society. Once hunter king saw princess, his mind filled with lust and wanted to possess her as his wife.

Sarachchandra questions from the readers that being physically stronger than women do men have the right to demand another's wife? Sarachchandra pays his keen attention to the conflict which arises in same gender roles of prince and hunter king. Writer symbolizes the behavior of men if it is a matter about pride and dignity of them. According to ancient rituals Rajaguru; the great master of Takshila decides to give her daughter in marriage to Prince Maname the cleverest student of Takshila. Daughter of Rajaguru has been treated as a dumb driven dole by her own father. He takes decisions of her life without asking a single word from princess. Rajaguru asks his daughter to come to him and when she came there, she asks,

Kumarā: Mā kendavuyē kim da nodanimi, piyāneni.(Sarachchandra, 2006, p.22)

(Prince: Dear father, may I know that why you ask me to come here?)

Instead of answering his daughter, Rajaguru announced his decision to prince Maname and asks his willingness for this marriage. Sarachchandra ironically shows how decisions about women have been taken by men. Therefore, he creates love towards Maname, in the mind of princess so that he could change the social belief that marriage of a woman only can be decided by men.

Biologically, men are stronger than women. So it is their responsibility to give care and protection to their wives. Sarachchandra conveys this message to the readers through *Maname*. Though after the marriage women do not get love and care from their husbands, writer shows how a woman is keen to get love from her husband.

Kumarā: Biya novanu sondura, oba nidana thuru māge me dunnen hā kaduven oba ārakshā karami.(Sarachchandra, 2006, p.25)

(Prince: Don't be fear my love, till you sleep I'll protect you with my sword)

Princess sings loveable songs to pay gratitude to the love which she gets from Maname. Writer ironically explains a sever gender issue between a married couple where women yearn for love and care from their husbands. In most cases, it is not understood by males hence they consider woman as a being who is born to perform only household activities after marriage. In ancient '*Maname Nāḍagama*' and '*Jathaka stories*' it was clearly mentioned that princess gave sword to hunter king to kill her husband so that she could live with hunter king. Hence, readers of that time cursed princess and labeled women as treacherous creatures. When Maname asks to hand over the sword, she hesitates to do so. Since she is honorable and believes in some code of ethics, she wanted to explain that hunter king does not take the advantage of his superiority in number of train. So it is not ethical to kill him but as a rational husband he did not understand what she meant. If there was strong mutual understanding between them he could have understood what she wanted to say. Maname could not understand the feelings of his wife which brought misfortune for them. Writer shows another issue that when there are no mutual bond between married couples which results in several gender issues between them.

*Kumarā: Sañdaluthale oba muwa kamalāduve velle oba- ma sitha thula senina pivisuna
e mohote sita oba nirathurū- pabana veyya mahada maduru*(Sarachchandra, 2006, p.24)

(At the casement, I glimpsed your lotus face. In my sole in that instant you took your place. From that moment onward enshrined alone a lamp in the halls of my heart you shone)

(Silva, 2013, p.177)

Princess becomes helpless in the middle of the jungle and she decides to go with hunter king in order to get the protection which is not accepted by readers. Writer has been influenced by psychoanalytic theory espoused by Sigmund Freud and Carl G. Jung creates a clear picture of human mind and their reactions when they face an unexpected situation. It is clear that princess confesses her love to the hunter king only for the sake of self-protection not because of lust.

4.2. The story of '*Dhruvasvamini*' is as follows:

Dhruvasvamini is a lady who is suffering from an unsatisfied marriage life with Ram Gupta; the king of Gupta emperor who is fond of liquor and wine. Though she is the princess of Gupta dynasty, she is kept under strict rules and supervision of her husband. Ram Gupta is a person who is interested in spending time with eunuchs, clowns, and dwarfs and is not bothered about the protection of his territory.

King Shak Raj, leader of the enemy's party sends a message that if Ram Gupta agreed to send his wife as a gift to him he would like to stop invading Ram Gupta's territory. Ram Gupta agreed to send his wife as a gift but Dhruvasvamini did not accept his decision. He met him alone and asked him to protect her dignity and if it is not she was prepared to stab herself. Chandra Gupta, brother of Ram Gupta got to know the demand of Shak Raj which abhorred him. Chandra Gupta, the real owner of the Gupta dynasty and Dhruvasvamini goes to Shak Raj and kills him. In third act Ram Gupta goes to Shak Raj's place to get his wife back but she refuses to come with him. Dhruvasvamini get the divorce from Ram Gupta which was not given to the royal ladies before.

According to Prasad, marriage is a bond which snatches all the rights of women. Dhruvasvamini had to face physical and mental harassments at her own place which is common in Indian society.

Ram Gupta: Dhruvdevi se kehdena chahiye ki woh mujhe or mujhse hi pyar karen.

(Prasad, n.d., p.14)

(It should be informed to Dhruvdevi that she must love me not to anyone else.)

Prasad criticizes how women were treated as an object in the society. She does not have right to love a person whom she likes. Marriage of Dhruvasvamini is performed as a gift to Gupta dynasty by her father. After the marriage her husband Ram Gupta also decided to give her as a gift to the enemy to protect their dynasty.

Ram Gupta: Tum, meri rāni! Nabi, nabi. Jāo tumko āj jāna padega. Tum upahār ki vasthu ho. Āj main thumbe kisi dūsre ko dēna chahati hun. (Prasad, n.d., p.23)

(You are my princess! No, no. Go away, you have to go. You are like a gift. Today I would like to give you to somebody else.)

Writer criticizes the right of men over women's body. According to Prasad Indian women never hesitate to sacrifice their life to protect their marriage life. Most of the Indian ladies do not have the right to get divorced which helped men to misuse them mentally as well as physically. By granting right to get the divorce to Dhruvasvamini, Prasad tries to bring social reforms which will help to solve gender issues in women's life.

Women were used as an object to protect the dynasty and pay one's gratitude towards another political leader. Through the characters like *Kōma* and *Mihirdev* writer emphasize that misusing women in politics is not acceptable.

Kōma: Mere Rājā! Āj tum ek stri ko apne pati se vichhinna kara kar apne garva ki tripti ke liye kaisa anart kar rabe hō? (Prasad, n.d., p.37)

(Oh my lord! By separating a married lady from her husband what an injurious thing you are going to do for the sake of your pride?)

It shows that writer does not agree with using women as a show piece in politics. Dhruvasvamini had to sacrifice her love and had to get married Ram Gupta because of political issues. Writer questions the ethics of victorious politician misbehaving with the ladies of the defeated party men.

Though Dhruvasvamini is the queen of Gupta dynasty she never gets love and care that she expects. Through the character of Dhruvasvamini, writer shows that how women suffer for love and affection. Ram Gupta is not a person who is strong enough to have a physical relationship with her wife. In order to hide his weakness he always consumes liquor and spends time with clowns and eunuchs.

Dhruvasvamini: Mai kēval rāni hi nabi, kintu stri bhi hun; mujhe apneko pati kehlane vale purush se kuch kebena hai, rāja se nahi. (Prasad, n.d., p.22)

(I am not merely a queen, but also a woman. I want to talk to the person who is believed as my husband, not to the king.)

Through the character of Kōma, writer reveals another side of the same issue that though she gets love and care of Shakraj, he never bothered to marry her. But he never hesitates to fulfill his all the needs from Kōma. Prasad emphasizes that though sexuality is a private matter it is important to respect some social and cultural norms so that both parties get safety and satisfaction in their life. Narayan highlights that Prasad pays more attention to the deeper relation between husband and wife. But above example shows that he also tries to emphasize deeper feelings of unmarried lovers through this play. It is because men always misuse their dominant power gained through patriarchal society. Shak Raj is a phenomenon of men those who misuse women in the name of love.

Prasad highlights the right to spend an independent life of women through this play. Writer questions from readers that though they get married do Ram Gupta has the right to use and send Dhruvasvamini as a gift to another person?

Dhruvasvamini: Main kēval yehi kehna chahati hun ki purushon ne striyon ko apni pashu- sampatti samajh kar un par atyachār karne ka abhyas banaliya hai... Yadi tum meri raksha nahi karsakte, apni kul ki maryada, nāri ka gaurav nahin bachā sakte to mujhe bēch bhi nahi sakte ho. (Prasad, n.d., p.21)

(I just wanted to say that men have started abusing women by considering them as dumb-driven cattle... If you cannot protect my dignity, the honor of your community and virtue of a woman, you cannot sell me at all.)

However, Dhruvasvamini is the princess of Gupta dynasty is like a prisoner in a golden cage.

4.3. Buddhist concepts and gender issues in 'Maname' and 'Dhruvasvamini':

As a Sri Lankan playwright Sarachandra was inspired by Buddhism and he used Buddhist philosophy while writing his play 'Maname'. In early 20th century, the behavior of Indian's was controlled by Hinduism and partly Buddhism. So Prasad may have used those concepts in 'Dhruvasvamini'. Importance of 'Five Precepts' has been highlighted in both plays. According to precepts, sexual misbehavior which leads to several gender issues is not accepted. Both writers convey the bad results of not observing this precept through characters such as hunter king and Shakraj.

Sehidārehiasantuttthovesiyāsupadissati,
dissatiparādāresu, taṃparābhavatōmukhaṃ.
(KhuddakaNikāya, Suṭṭa Nipataya, ParabhavaSuṭṭa, Vargavagga, 108 stanza, p.20)

According to 'Parabhava Suṭṭa' the one who is not satisfied with his wife and associates with prostitutes will be declined.

Yāvakīvañ ca Ānanda Vajji yā tākulitthiyokulakumāriyo, tānaokkassapasayhavāsessanti, vuddhiyeva Ānanda Vajjināṃpāṭikākhā no parihāni. Kin tite Ānandasutaṃ Vajjiyānntāni Vajjināṃ Vajji-cetiyaṇiabbhantarānic' evabāhirāni ca tānisakkarontigarukarontimānentipūjentitesaṃ ca dinna-pubbaṃkatapubbaṃdhammikambaliṃ no parihāpentīti?

(DīghaNikāya, MahāparinibbanaSuṭṭa, p.74)

According to 'MahaParinibbanaSuṭṭa' if someone sexually misbehave with a lady by force, he will be declined. It is clear that Jaishankar Prasad successfully creates the character of Shak Raj according to above Buddhist thought. Reason for the pathetic death of Shak Raj is lust towards another person's wife. If Vedda king does not try to misbehave with beloved wife of prince Maname, the unfortunate death of Maname could have been stopped.

In 'Dasa Raja Dhamma- Suṭṭa Pitaka' lord Buddha has preached about how a king should rule a country which shows an ideal king who does not discriminate people according to their gender. Maname and Chandra Gupta's characters highlight above concepts. In 'Singala Suṭṭa' which is in 'Diga Nikaya- Suṭṭa Pitaka' lord Buddha preached about responsibilities and duties of husband and wife. In both plays writers have analyzed those concepts with the main characters of their plays.

5. Conclusions

This paper attempted to highlight how gender issues were discussed in two different plays by Edirivira Sarachchandra and Jaishankar Prasad. By using literature survey this research has tried to identify how gender issues arise in two different countries and how they are reflected in the plays of Sri Lanka and India. In analyzing data it is clear that both of these Asian playwrights have been influenced by Western gender theories as well as they have used Buddhist concepts with respect to the issues between two different genders.

Sarachchandra could challenge the traditional belief of infidelity of women and Prasad could start an open discussion among readers, about sexual weaknesses and how it affects the family life. It is clear that there is no class, cast or country for gender issues; it has spread in every society where one gender does not try to understand the other.

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