

The Paradigmatic Revolutionization of Femininity: Resisting Gender-based Suppression in Sreeja's Play: Labour Room

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper analyzes Sreeja's play, 'Labour Room' from a feminist perspective and encapsulates the multi-faceted circumstances which govern a woman's willingness to either embrace motherhood or be contemptuous towards maternity. Another pivotal feminist approach that has been incorporated in the play is the need to resist the reductionism of women to their skin color and flout the idea that only fair-skinned females are an embodiment of femininity. The researcher has employed discourse analysis and thematic analysis as qualitative research tools in the play. Thus, the paper serves as a testament of the varied forms of suppression that are undergone by women, along with the need to seek ways to emancipate women.

Keywords: Motherhood, Feminist, Femininity, Reductionism, Resist, Emancipate

Introduction

Theatre can serve as a powerful space to give voices to the downtrodden people who often undergo discrimination and prejudice in society. One of the most prominent forms of discrimination that exists in society is the gender-based subjugation that is experienced by women. There are multi-faceted causal factors of gender-based discrimination that is recurrently experienced by women in society. These causal factors include patriarchy, internalized misogyny by women themselves, reductionism of women to their bodies, imposed decisions on women, and forced pregnancies or motherhood. Theatre artists, especially women, have played a significant role in highlighting these forms of gender-based discrimination and the need to resist against them.

“From 1990s onwards, the invisibility of womanist presence has consistently been put into question through a series of theoretical and sociopolitical introgessions which contested dominant representations of woman's body and living space in culture, language and society by feminist activists and performers” (Sreeja, 2013, p. 550).

The womanist presence on stage comes to its full bloom when the issues of women are represented by the women playwrights. Women playwrights are more likely to give a voice to oppressed women in society whose issues, traumas and concerns are barely taken into consideration. In that context, women playwrights can employ issue-specific theatre to highlight the subjugation of women in various spheres of society and the dire need to resist all those forms of subjugation.

“Of course, the woman playwright does not personally stand up and make a speech in her own voice, putting her own views and convictions, but she engages with something which is

unconsciously felt as a far greater threat: she provides a text and meanings which others must follow. In her own voice, refracted through the dialogue and structure of the play, she communicates to her audience” (Wandor, 1984, pp.85-86).

Sreeja’s play, *Labour Room* bears, the testimony of the oppression that is faced by women in society in various forms and the need to overthrow all such forms. The notion that society perceives women merely as objects who are required to satisfy the male gaze, the popular yet regressive belief that only fair-skinned girls or women can be desirable or attractive, and the recurrently observable incidents of unwanted pregnancies followed by traumatizing experiences of motherhood have been highlighted in the play.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the play ‘Labour Room’ written by K.V. Sreeja. Discourse analysis and thematic analysis are used in this paper. Discourse analysis

“is associated with the use of language in various forms of communication such as written, spoken or signs of language. It helps in analyzing how people say things, its impact on the audience, and how it affects the society, or the way society influences language/communication” (Manzoor et al., 2019, p.301).

The interaction between various characters in the play has been analyzed in order to understand their perspectives and highlight the nuances of motherhood and women’s experiences in society. Another qualitative research method employed in this paper is thematic analysis.

“Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79).

The primary data that is chosen for this paper is Sreeja’s play, *Labour Room*. Through the plot, the characterization and the dialogue-based conversations in the play, the recurrently occurring themes and their significance are identified and analyzed in the paper. Supplementary sources, including scholarly articles and literary critiques related to their works, are used as secondary sources in the paper for context and critical insights.

Discussion

The present research paper has been written from a feminist perspective with an explicit intention of unfolding the intricacies of motherhood. The paper lays emphasis on flouting the reductionism of females to physical attractiveness by subtly pointing out at the fetish of fair-skinned female bodies. The act of reducing females to the color of their skins leads to their gender-based subjugation. The sad state of affairs lies in the fact that people are always concerned about the physical appearance of girls. The society adamantly lays emphasis on the notion that girls should have a fair complexion and, if they do not have fair-skinned bodies, they are doomed to be neglected and treated as inferior beings. This thought process was clearly exhibited in the play when one of the characters, that is, Woman 2 (an aristocratic lady around 30 years old), kept inquiring about the complexion of the newly born baby girl of Woman 1. Woman 2 repeatedly questioned by the nurses in the hospital about the physical appearance of the newly born girl child and it is explicit in the following conversation that was held between Woman 2 and the nurses in the play:

“Woman 2 (To Nurse 2): Is the child fair? Does she have lots of hair?”

Nursing Assistant (With distraction): I didn’t notice.

Woman 2 (To the walking nurse): Please stop. Is the girl child fair?

Nurse 1: I will come back. Now I am busy” (Sreeja, 2013, p.556).

Society places such a huge burden on girls to look physically desirable that as girls grow, they often focus their entire attention on looking attractive, but they barely attach any significance to other facets of development, like educational excellence, personality grooming, communication skills, professional expertise etc. Consequently, the vision of girls regarding their personal development becomes very narrow as it remains restricted to grooming their physical appearance and therefore, the scope of their development beyond their physical desirability is diminished. It is this thought process that needs to be challenged and reformed. Society needs to pave the way for the growth and development of girls beyond their physical appearance so that girls do not remain reduced to their bodies, but rather, they become exposed to all facets of individual development in areas like education, medicine, engineering, science and technology. It is important for girls not to internalize misogyny that perpetuates the desirability of fair-skinned bodies and treats dusky-skinned girls as a worthless part of society. When girls and women learn that reducing themselves to the fair skin of their bodies is simply a way of demeaning themselves, they will understand that their femininity is much more than the color of their skin. Astonishingly, it was Woman 2 in the play, who repeatedly interrogated about the skin color of the newly born child of Woman 1. There, Woman 2, became an embodiment of the internalization of misogyny by women. Women 2 barely had any realization that judging the worth of girls and women on the grounds of the fairness or duskiness of their complexion simply reduces them to nothing but objects. Therefore, unlearning such obsolete notions of beauty becomes an important target for all the women who have been conditioned in the wrong manner as a result of being brought up in a patriarchal society.

The play also lays emphasis on the fact that when women go through illegitimate pregnancies, they tend to lose their mental sanity and they become emotionally disturbed. There are replete instances in the play that showcase that maternity must not be necessarily treated as a benchmark of femininity as cases of illegitimate pregnancies inevitably lead to the deterioration of a woman’s mental sanity. One of the characters in the play, that is, Woman 3, displayed frantic behaviour and emotionally disturbed behavioral traits as she got illegitimately pregnant. She was left all alone to endure the pain of her illegitimate pregnancy and the absolute absence of anyone who she could rely upon for emotional comfort during her pregnancy, further worsened her mental stability. Her emotional collapse became evident towards the closure of the play when she broke down in tears and said to Woman 2:

“Woman 3: I too, am afraid of my child’s fate. If it is a girl, after ten or fifteen years, she too will be in a similar labour room, like me . . . with no one waiting outside . . . If it is a boy . . . someone who sells even me . . . I am afraid (Weeps aloud. Woman 2 goes near her and puts a comforting hand. Woman 3 breaks away. With anger and self-contempt) don’t touch me. Don’t you understand. I’m a fallen woman” (Sreeja, 2013, pp. 573-574).

This dialogue of Woman 3 indicates that she belongs to the underprivileged section of society where women are forced into prostitution. As a result, Woman 3 became pregnant out of wedlock and, consequently, she had to bear an unwanted pregnancy. However, what is important to be pointed out here is that there should always be a way for women to overcome unwanted pregnancies. This could be done only if abortion is made easier for women in those cases where they become pregnant against their will. This is because the future of children who are born out of wedlock (especially when their mother is not willing to give birth to them), is likely to be highly gloomy. There is absolutely no rationality behind giving birth to those children that have no one to rely on for their emotional, educational, and financial

needs as they grow up. Thus, in such cases, termination of unwanted pregnancies must be made legal so that the illegitimately born children could be saved from being born in situations that are bound to be full of adversities for them. In the case of Woman 3, it was clearly evident in the play that she was not mentally prepared to give birth to her child because she knew that after birth, her child's life would be miserable and full of unending challenges. This is why, while conversing with Woman 2, Woman 3 said,

“Woman 3: You just don't know how much I love my child . . .No, all the children in this world. That is why I don't want my child to share life in this world with me. The unborn and the dead are more aged than the living. Let my child be more aged than me within and without this womb” (Sreeja, 2013, pp. 570-571).

Hence, Woman 3 was well aware of the fact that if she gives birth to an alive and healthy baby, she won't be able to provide a conducive environment to raise her child. Since, she was completely aware of the brutal consequences that might be faced by her illegitimate child after being born, she wished to have a stillbirth. It is quite obvious for society to criticize women like Woman 3 but what is important to realize is that she became illegitimately pregnant out of forced prostitution. Thus, in such cases, if women get a chance to abort their children for a greater reason to save themselves and their unborn children from the adversities of life, then it could serve as a rescue measure for them. Therefore, the decision taken by women to abort their children in such cases does not indicate a compromise with their femininity. Rather, it indicates the revolutionization of femininity as it will empower women to make decisions for themselves considering all the situations that are either conducive or unfavourable for giving birth to children. Therefore, the choice of embracing or declining motherhood must be given to women and their decision must ultimately be respected without any predetermined set of judgments. Thus,

“Sreeja's Labour Room envisages labour room as a woman's organic space and as a feminist metaphor which problematizes all contours of contemporary women's life and brings home the intense trauma and socio/psychological concerns associated with maternity by bruising theatrically the myths of motherhood” (Sreeja, 2013, p. 551).

Conclusion

Unlearning the heavily regressive, archaic, and orthodox notions is a humongous task that has to be accomplished by both men and women who have been brought up in a patriarchal society. One such notion, as discussed in the play, is, of-course, the prevalence of discrimination in society against girls and women, on the basis of the color of their skin. Fair skin is unfortunately and illogically equated with beauty, desirability, attraction, and an idealistic representation of femininity. On the contrary, dusky skin complexion is associated with ugliness, lack of desirability, absence of attraction, and a flawed representation of femininity. It is so important to realize that the complexion of any human being essentially depends on biological factors like genes and the amount of melanin present in one's skin. Therefore, it is certainly regressive to presume that fair-skinned girls are supposed to be more desirable than dusky-skinned girls. Therefore, discriminating against girls on the grounds of their skin color definitely needs to be put to a halt. Lastly, it is important to realize that motherhood is a personal choice and different women can have different experiences of motherhood due to their distinctive circumstances. It should solely be the decision of a woman to give birth to her child or to abort it if the circumstances are completely unfavorable. Motherhood should not be imposed on a woman if her

mental, physical or emotional stability is heavily compromised in the process. Hence, empowering women on such fronts, helping women to unlearn the regressive notions that have been prevalent in patriarchal societies for ages and enabling women to look at themselves and their lives from a fresh and feminist perspective, will surely enhance the chances of the creation of a holistic and sustainable society for everyone.

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