

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

"MATSYA GANDHI" – A STRONG PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN QUESTION IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Emancipation and empowerment of women plays a major role in the development of a nation. Our country has achieved only partial success in fulfilling this aim. But we have miles to go. Women are always given a derogatory position in our society. They are hindered from contributing their true potential. She is always trapped in the restraints of convention. There man is the 'centre' and woman is always the 'other'. She is not allowed to enter into the space where he dominates. She is always kept in the margins and is always considered unequal to men. In the earlier days, she had to face the problems only within her family. But now when she is capable of earning her own, she has to face the challenges imposed on her by her male counterparts in the workplace. The present study deals with the woman question still prevalent in our society and how this creates a negative impact on the life of working class women from the lower strata of our society. Sajitha Madathil exposes this idea through the portrayal of the life of women fish vendors in her one act play *Matsyagandhi*.

Key words: marginalization, *Matsyagandhi*, women fish vendors, male domination, globalisation

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the contemporary fiction today presents the clichéd situations like women suffering in the hands of patriarchy and the challenges they face in a male dominated society and within the family. Unlike them, Sajitha Madathil moves quite divergently. She travels into the darker side of Indian society where women are marginalized not only because of their sex but also of their caste and community to which they belong. Caste system is one of the major problems faced by our society today. The

lower caste is relegated to the lowest strata of society and is treated as outcaste. It is the women folk who suffer a lot in such a society. A woman in our society is already marginalized. But when she belongs to the lower strata of the society, we can see her twice marginalized- as a woman and as a woman who belongs to the low class. This adverse effect of marginalization is well portrayed through the life of a widowed fisher woman in *Matsyagandhi*. Originally written in Malayalam, the play exposes the pathetic life of a fishing community living in the coastal areas of

Kerala. The play mainly focuses on the condition of the women belonging to that community, and the various women question she has to face during her struggle for existence. It presents the anxiety of a woman regarding life, reality and social circumstances. The contemporary issues embedded in the play makes it more relevant to our times.

Sajitha Madathil travels through the life of Araya community, the community whose problems are less considered or discussed. The story takes place in Kerala, Gods own Country. The people of this community depend only on the sea for their survival. There, a woman's duties are not constrained to house hold activities alone; she also belongs to the working class community who strive hard to make both ends meet. The sea is their mother- incarnation of Goddess. They have their own belief and culture. Certain myths guide their life. The life of a fisher man who goes to the sea will be protected by the Kadamma as long as his wife remains chaste. This belief is intertwined with the belief that Kadamma, the sea- mother is the destroyer and preserver of the community. She will take care of them as long as the women in the community remain chaste. But the plight of such chaste women in today's society is very pathetic. The narrator of the play is a woman fish vendor. She is a widow. Through her, the author brings into limelight the challenges faced by a fisher woman in today's society.

The struggle for existence of a fisher woman starts early in the morning with many responsibilities on her shoulder before going to work. She is a fish vendor. She has to leave her home at four in the morning. Before that she has to complete all her house hold duties. From the play it is clear that the time she usually reaches after her work is quite late. Sometimes when she gets back home, the kids may have already gone to sleep. Even she doesn't get enough time to spend with them. She recounts the struggle she has to go through, to get the fish and to get it transported to the market. In the harbour she has to argue with fish traders for getting good stuff. Sometimes they cheat her by giving her bad items. She

is a woman, how long can she argue with such strong people?

A keralite cannot even think of a day without fish. But they cannot accept fish vendors coming near them because of their fish-stink. However they are happy when this fish is cooked and served on their dining table. The buses will not permit her to get in as she has fish-stink. The domination of male is much exposed in the fish markets. She has to encounter a lot of challenges put forward by the male counterparts to suppress her. She has to fight the domination of men at the fish market. They monopolise the fish market too. All the tidy spots will be conquered by the puffed-up males, leaving those unhygienic places for women. The women folk have to occupy the dirty spots with swarming flies and mosquitoes. Lack of proper sanitation facilities, pure drinking water etc makes their situation worse. Women fight with each other under the tap to get a precious drop of water to drink. There too, they have to face the wrath of men. These women can't even clean up their face or body to get rid of this fish stink. But the men folk enjoy a lot of advantages in the field. These puffed up males use good clothing, spray themselves with perfumes and go around on their own vehicles. Those who sell in the market occupy tidy places and sell fish for cheap rate to their regular customers.

Apart from the harassment of their own men folk, she has to face the troubles caused by other ruffians there. The working atmosphere in the market is not so congenial for them. The ruffians in the market treat them as an easy scape goat for fulfilling their sexual desires. Intentional touching, eve teasing, filthy comments are some of the common examples which create lot of frustration in the minds of women. Here, the narrator remembers the story of Matsyagandhi from Mahabharatha.

Sathyavathi is the queen of the Kuru king Shantanu of Hastinapur and the great grandmother of the Pandava and Kaurava. When she was the daughter of the Chedi King Vasu, she was cursed celestial nymph-turned fish Adrika with fish stench over her body. So she was named Matsyagandhi. She was named Sathyavathi and brought up by the fisherman

chieftain. She helped her father in ferrying. A wandering Rishi Parashara met her and he rewarded her with a sweet fragrance emanating from her body. She later got married to the king Shanthanu. The narrator compares it to the deplorable plight of present day matsyagandhis. They are marginalized by the society and are often looked down upon only because they bear fish stink. She adds that the ruffians who rape them in the market even in the broad day light are not bothered about their fish stink. There too, she is treated only as a sex object. Here she refers to Flory, the fisherwoman who was brutally raped by the ruffians publicly while she was hawking fish in Prashanth Nagar Housing Colony, Ulloor, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, in 2000. She pleaded for help to many, including the house wives but all of them turned their back. The ruffians are ridiculously called 'three sages'.

The intermingling of their life before and after globalization too makes the story relevant to the present day scenario. Globalization too brought an adverse effect on the life of the community, especially the women. They are crushed in the hands of trawlers and foreign fishing ships. These trawlers slaughter the little fishes and decay the sea. The foreign ships take away the life of the fisher men. The narrator's husband was also a victim in the hands of these foreign vessels. They left her and her kids alone. Now it is her responsibility to nurture her kids. For this, she has to strive hard in this male dominated society. To get fish, she has to depend on harbours and has to walk long distance to reach there early in the morning. There too, she has to face a lot of challenges. If she is a little late, she won't get good fish and as a result of globalization, fish has become dearer. This fish is bought and sold at low rate by the puffed up males and this creates a dilemma for the women fish vendors.

She yearns for the serene past when life was all delightful. The sea was full of fish. Children of their community were healthy and fish was not expensive. The abundant availability of fish from the sea stopped them from hunting for fish in the neighbouring harbours or markets. Before the advent of trawlers,

the sea mother sustained her children with her gleaming silvery fish. The life of the fishing community was quite contended. Neither the trawlers nor the foreign vessels were there to decay the sea or take away the life of the fisher men.

Another myth which prevailed in their community was that Kadamma would become angry if she finds a woman on her shore with her hair down. The people consider Kadamma as their sole mother. Our narrator, who is a widow, has no one to share her sorrow other than her sea mother. The children, especially girls, would rely on their mother for solace. She thinks that her sea mother can save her from all the dilemmas. By seeing her hair down Kadamma would become angry and she would shatter those trawlers and big foreign vessels. The stench is not the fish stink from these women's bodies, but the stench from the sea, where the little fishes are slaughtered by the trawler boats and the stench of the shattered dreams of the matsyagandhis. But the irony is that Kadamma who is given a female perspective, too is not free from male domination. The sea mother is swallowed by the huge hands of globalisation. She is captured by the government. Even the Goddess is not safe in today's world. Then what will be condition of ordinary women?

The knitting of intertextual elements like the myths makes the play more interesting. The chastity myth, the mythological story from Mahabharata all shows the power of a woman. During ancient days, women have been venerated and worshipped as goddesses. The great scholar Manu said, "Where women are worshipped, there the deities are pleased." Through presenting these myths in this play, the author reminds us how these myths are devalued in today's society. Now myths are mere myths. They have no importance in our world. In the present male dominated society, women are not even considered as an independent personality.

Conclusion

Sajitha Madathil made a good effort to spotlight the difficulties faced by the people living in the lower strata of our society. She pictures the real life of the Araya community. The pathetic plight of

fisher women is well discussed here. Globalization too has made an adverse effect on the life of these poor women. Government makes tall promises and does nothing for the upliftment of the backward class. The poor masses remain illiterate and are reduced to vote-banks only to be used at the time of elections.

Education is the foundation on which any change is built. Economic independence helps women to live independently. But lack of education keeps her unaware of her rights. It prevents her from fighting against the challenges imposed on her by the society. Learning helps her to gain her rights back by breaking the chains with which they are bound. Government

should take necessary steps for the upliftment of these people. Women's education and health care should be improved. Unless man's attitude towards women changes, no strict laws can change the condition of women in our society.

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