

WOMEN IN SARATCHANDRA'S PLAYS

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Being a silent observer so far of a phenomenon which stretches as far back in my sensibility and consciousness as Guttilla and Musila, the current wave of attacks on several artists on grounds of anti-feminism has made me want to break this silence. In an age when the past is not held sacred, when old institutions crumble to give way to new, it isn't a surprise that artists, who at the time of their creation forged ahead on new ground and recreated from the old, come under this same onslaught.

We all rode on the energizing waves of '56 nationalism, that spurred works in all fields of art from theatre to film, music and dance. That this nationalism degenerated into 'chauvinism' among some, be it religious, feminist or ethno-linguistic is a tragic sign of our times. Seeing Saratchandra's plays within a time span of thirty some years, and observing with some dismay a master craftsman of the art of theatre being attacked on the limited grounds of feminism, pushed me to voice my views on his handling of female characters in his plays, with reference to *Rattaran*, *Kada Valalu*, *Maname*, *Mahasara* and *Pemato Jayati Soko*.

In *Kada Valalu* two women, a grand-mother and her young daughter who have seen better times, are caught in the manipulations of a crafty street vendor. In *Maname* a master-teacher gives his daughter as a parting 'gift' to his best student-prince. She is then 'taken over' by a ruler of the forest (Veddah king) who kills her husband in a duel, apparently with her help. When she confesses to an attraction to him, he abandons her to the evils of the forest. In *Mahasara*, a kingdom is rocked by the theft of the queen's necklace by a she-monkey who apes the queen. A chain of lies by men in the service of the king, stops at the town courtesan, again a victim, who openly protests the injustice of her accusation and judgement. In *Pemato Jayati Soko* a woman enters the all male domain of a master teacher and his student princes and is lured into her death by the jealous students.

In re-examining these plays within the framework of feminism; although this does little justice to a creator who combines a command of language, human insight, and musical awareness into writing for the theatre; what emerges is a handling of female characters with humane sympathy and not anti-feminism. Saratchandra wrote these plays at a time when feminism as a conscious movement was cutting its teeth in Sri Lanka; when there were no women writing in Sinhala for the stage. When even the critics had no training to look at a piece of art with a feminist eye. He worked within the traditional framework of *kolam* and *nadagam* styles, dramatising *Jataka* and folk tales in which women were depicted as stereotypes. Given these limitations he has reinterpreted the female characters in his plays as victims of the society they lived in.

Women in their varied states of oppression in a patriarchal system, tend to repeat the patterns of oppression they have internalised, on each other. This is shown in a rather raw manner in a very early work *Rattaran* where we see the usual mother vs daughter-in-law conflict carried out to extremes, where each takes turns in burning the other with the compliance of the son/husband. But in a more mature play, *Mahasara*, the manifestations of similar patterns are demonstrated, when the queen bulldozes the king to condemn the town courtesan to death, when the latter is found suspect for stealing her necklace. Here when the courtesan became suspect and victim of the judgement, the chorus accentuates the injustice and the absurdity of the situation by their comment "a woman is always at the root of all evil"! One has to be very naive to take these words rid of its irony!

But when he deals with women as victims in a male-dominated society he is more serious and his sense of the tragic rules the whole play. If *Maname* ends with the Veddah king abandoning the Maname princess; after she reveals that she waived in handing her husband the sword because she was attracted to his challenger; declaring that he cant trust such "fickleness" in women (!) we could label the playwright as anti-feminist. But it ends with a heart-rending plea for sympathy by the abandoned princess for being torn between her wifely loyalty to the prince and her attraction to the veddah king, and the closing comment by the narrator, "such were the events/one does not know who was to blame". We are left with three points of view and the complexity of the tragedy.

If *Maname* sees the tragic in a woman abandoned, Saratchandra's most poetic play *Pemato Jayati Soko* also reveals the sheer cruelty of a male dominated society where a woman is so victimised that she is lured to her death by those who resent her intrusion into their world. *Disapamok* the master teacher, after his meeting with Swarnatilaka, a woman exiled from her city of birth for spurning a wealthy suitor, confesses to a need to rethink all that has been written by the ancients about women. That the conflict of the play is heightened by the fact that his students are too rigid to accept the change in him, resulting in the plot to carry out her death heightens the tragedy of the situation.

The only criticism I would make on grounds of anti-feminism would be the use of female players only as pure decoration without much relevance to the content, in the choreographic interludes in some of the productions. This obsession with the decorative seems to be a permeation from what's evident in our present society.

This brief essay is to make a point that one cannot yank an artist out of his time of creation when criticising his work, if it is to be valid.