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Challenging the Ideology of Marriage in Volga's Play *The Six of Them*

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The paper explores how Volga through her characters in the play *The Six of Them* attempts to expose the ideology created around the patriarchal institutions, such as marriage. If marriage is one of those institutions which are required to keep the society functioning, there is no justification whatsoever for the male gender to interpret the rules of the system in favour of him. All the six characters in the play experience relationship with men in some or the other institutions, including marriage. What emerges from their discussion is that, the discourse, the codes, the rules, and the measures of propriety are designed, maintained, executed, and adjudicated by patriarchy from time to time. It also emerges that they initiate to counter the ideological coercion in the institution of marriage rather than marriage itself. They want to humanise the otherwise hierarchical institution by infusing love in it.

Volga (Popuri Lalita Kumari) is a Telugu playwright. Her Telugu play '*Vallu Aruguru*', which is translated in English by M. Sridhar and Alladi Uma as *The Six of Them* (2005). The play is a sequel, where six women characters from six different novels of Challam, Telugu novelist, happen to meet. They are Sasirekha (*Sasirekha*), Rajeswari (*Maidanam*), Padmavati (*Daivamichchina Bharya*), Aruna (*Aruna*), Sundaramma (*Brahmaneeekam*), and Lalsa (*Jeevitaadarsan*). Tutun Mukherji, in her note on the playwright in *Staging Resistance*, introduces these characters, which helps us to understand their background.

The first character is Sasirekha, who was married in her childhood. When grown up, she falls in love with another man, Krishnudu. Instead of going to her husband, she elopes with Krishnudu. Later, she is attracted to his friend Sundara Rao for his music. She began to live with him but soon realizes his shallow nature. After being abused and ill-treated by men, she is completely disillusioned. She then meets the Bramha Samajists Rama Rao and Navjeevan Das, but they suggest her that to amend her ways she should marry Rama Rao. Now she is confronted with the same problem of marriage which she avoided in her earlier days.

Second character is Rajeswari, who is a housewife and has little awareness of her own sexuality. But she falls in love with a man called Ameer and even aborts her own child to be faithful in love. During his absence she comes close to Meera. Seeing this, Ameer becomes jealous and finally kills himself. But Rajeswari takes blame on herself and is arrested.

Padmavati is the third character, who likes to keep love and marriage distinct. She loves Radhakrishna but declines to marry him. She thinks that marriage dampens love.

Aruna is an independent person who is reluctant to enter in any kind of relationship with man that might curb her freedom.

Sundaramma is an illiterate woman. She is completely destroyed by the over possessive nature of her husband. After his death she has to face the real world without having any first hand knowledge of the world. She is drawn in an illicit

relationship with Chandrashekhar and becomes pregnant. They are forced to marry. He starts to abuse her. She is also excommunicated by the society. She is exploited by the people around her in the name of treating her child. Her child dies and then she kills the man also who has exploited her.

The last character is Lalsa, who has participated in salt satyagraha and even gone to jail. There, she has seen the hypocrisy of some of the satyagrahis and is disillusioned. She marries Laxmansingh, but later is attracted to Malavankar for his music. She leaves her home to be with her lover from whom she receives nothing but abuse.

Now the playwright here dramatizes the supposed conversation of these characters, who share their painful experiences of their relationships with men in and outside the framework of marriage. However the basic question, around which the play revolves, and as Sasirekha says, is 'Why marriage where there is love?' (Volga 469)

Socially, marriage is an important institution where two persons, a man and a woman from different families come together with their and their elders' consent, under certain rituals designed by customary laws. The custom of marriage is so rooted in the social psyche that any relationship between man and woman outside marriage is considered as illicit and thereby condemned and the persons involved in are also excommunicated sometimes by the traditional societies. The point of discussion here is not to object the marriage as an institution but to have a critique of implementation of the institution with a clear bias in favour of male gender. A close study of this play also reveals that the women characters also seek to expose the diabolic nature of man who uses customs, rituals, and social institutions as tools to keep the female counterpart under hold. Social principles, rituals, and customs are so cleverly designed and followed with authority that the real motive of domination never appears to the fore. A woman is made to believe that by following the customs without questioning, she is performing her supreme duty, assigned to her by our society.

The women characters, here have broken the customary framework of society. They have experienced different men, not only their husbands but other men also. They have penetrated deep in male mentality, they have also found exploited women under the clutches of their oppressors, and they have also discovered the futility of marriage devoid of love. The existence of marriage without love is questioned. They feel that unless there is complete equality between the two genders and unless there is a scope for growth of respectful self, marriage becomes an artificial structure of relationship, a shackle.

Sasirekha loves Krishna's handsome looks, Sundara Rao's melodic music and Rama Rao's truthfulness. These are beautiful things and she asks how one can resist from loving beautiful things. She believes that what love desires is not one's body but the soul. But neither Sundara Rao nor the world understands this. Her experience with Brahma Samajists Navjeevan Das and Rama Rao is revealed in the following words:

"But you know, these Brahma Samajists only question Hindu traditions. They want to be content with changing religious superstitions and outdated ways of thinking of the outside world. But they can't tolerate changes in the man woman relationship at home." (472)

Sasirekha is always treated by the women of Calcutta as sinful and as she says, "(they) won't respect me unless I get married" (473). Clearly marriage is the only condition where everything can be sanctified. But Sasirekha is defiant against such custom and society. She says:

“What is in society that it can dictate to us? Why should we always yield to its authority? Doesn’t society respect those husbands who treat their slave-like wives worse than animals?”(473)

Rajeswari, who has loved Ameer and even aborts her child to keep herself faithful towards her love asks, ‘Is eloping worse than miserliness? Is it meaner than money lending?’(474) Padmavati is a brave girl since her childhood. She used to hit marbles straight and climb to the topmost branches. She used to fight like boys. But even in childhood days, while playing, Radhakrishna used to say to her:

“If your husband is great, you too will be great. You are a woman after all, how can you be great- he said.” (476)

Now this view is imprinted on the mind of the child since his/her childhood. This ideology is set to prove that a woman can not be great herself unless she is attached to her husband. This is a myth created and perpetuated always and everywhere. It is expected from a wife that she should not only please her husband but subscribe to his views. But Padmavati resents this when she says, “Shouldn’t I, who is his soul-mate and chosen girl, finally become his slave and servant?”(477) A woman is given the impression that she is a soul-mate and a chosen girl but finally is turned into a slave, a servant. But Padmavati does not have malice against men. She likes to wake up men out of ideological slumber to make them ‘realize how intense and lofty life is.’(478) She says:

“We have to encourage them. We have to lift them to great height. We must enthuse them to great work, great ideals, and great thoughts. We must fill them with fire. We must rescue them from their lifeless lives.”(478)

Aruna gives prime importance to her freedom. She does not like to entangle ‘in rotten old women’s codes, and dilapidated homes.’ (478) She retorts angrily towards the behaviour of husbands that they change women into statues and hide them in a corner even the very nature is changing. She says:

“The flaw that shuts woman behind closed doors and dances in front of her saying, ‘Look at my face! Look at my head!’ while spring festivities enlivening women are being celebrated for the well-being of the entire universe! These husbands- they are repositories of flaws.”(480)

This last line reminds us Marx’s proposition, ‘Capitalism thus contains within itself the seeds of its own decay. It produces its own grave-diggers.’

In the changed situation even education and jobs have not been able to give women the desired freedom. The popularized definition of freedom is given by Aruna as ‘asking for property and rights to own women’. She corrects this ideological definition:

“Freedom is not being afraid of the desires, aspirations, dreams, and emotions that emerge from our souls but allowing those natural outpourings to come out from within us and quench the thirst of the lives within.”(480)

This sets the goal to be achieved through a change in the present status of women. This gives an alternate path. Padmavati asks, ‘How can women get courage?

Change, freedom? Against whom they should wage war and how? Should they even think of waging a war?' (481) Lalsa gives a Marxian reply:

"Unless they strongly oppose those who believe that women are their property, how can they obtain freedom? If they don't question caste, religion, and the elders and wage a war on them, how can they overthrow outdated traditions and ideas." (481)

Lalsa believes that 'experiences alone constitute life'. She protests against the society which prohibits women from having experiences, a society where even the

urge to have an experience is prohibited and a society that says nothing other than 'upholding family's honor is important for women.' (481) Women are taught to be the guards of family honor leaving men scot-free to malign it. There is no code as such for men and even if it is there it is followed strictly as a woman is expected to follow? A woman transgressor of the social code is punished, tortured and even excommunicated but the male transgressor does not meet any such consequences.

Lalsa has participated in salt satyagraha. Her revolutionary nature becomes clear when she suggests the way for achieving freedom. She says-

"I felt we would get independence through armed revolt, through the strength of bloodshed, or because of certain circumstances in the world around us." (483)

This echoes Marxian call to the proletariats throughout the world to take up arms against capitalism. She makes a waking call to all women making them realize their immense potentialities, which they can utilize to realize their goal-

"The great strength that could melt rock with a single look, the sweetness that could soften metal with just one word, the greatness of the soul that can wash away all the errors with a song

.....There is only one way! Courage. Faith in life. Revolt against stupidity, fate, and authority. Fearlessness about the future." (484)

Sundaramma is another character who is illiterate and poor. Her husband's over possessive nature kills her personality and she becomes totally dependent on him. After her husband's death she is exploited by people around her even sexually in the name of protecting her child. Now her question is what her two marriages have given her. A sick baby whom she has to kill in desperation, excommunication and sexual exploitation? She asks-

"Are all women like this? For the sake of money, do they have to plead with husbands and men?" (488)

This resembles with the situation of workers who are dependents on the capitalists for their wages. And here she dreams of a situation, 'My baby and I- what a beautiful dream! If only the two of us could have lived in our own world without the interference of this world.'

To conclude the dialogue she asks the million dollar question that challenges the very existence of the process of marriage which has become merely a dry process for women like her. She asks-

“Can’t we have children without recourse to marriage? To have children why is marriage necessary?”(488)

Lalsa also asks-

“Why marriage when there’s love?
What need of marriage to have children?”(489)

What these women want is clearly revealed in the slogans of the protesting girls-

“We want not husband and wife relationship but companionship.”(489)

This is exactly similar to Marxian theory of class war, where the society is divided in two camps. The haves, possessing the material and political resources, and the have-nots, struggling for the resources. Under Marxian philosophy they determine to overthrow the former.

Now these questions are not related to only a woman or a person. They have wider implications applicable to all societies. This is recognizing the questions of women, articulating them and seeking answers from those who are sitting in authorities since ages, in order to transform the man-woman relationship. One of the protesting girls clarifies the scope of the issue as follows-

“Even if you don’t know the value of this, we do. These are not personal questions but political questions.”(490)

From personal to social to political- the journey has begun.

This paper intends to view the play through Marxian principles. In his essay on “Marxist Criticism” Peter Barry remarks that ‘Marxism seeks to change the world, unlike other philosophies which merely try to understand the world.’ Secondly he says that Marxism sees “progress as coming through the struggle for power between different social classes.” He adds that in Marxist model society is conceived as a base and superstructure. The superstructure is cultural world of ideas, art, religion, etc. and this is not always innocent. (Barry 156-158)

In order to exercise control the state uses, as Althusser says, ideological apparatuses like political parties, churches, family, and art which foster an ideology- a set of ideals and attitudes- which is sympathetic to the aims of the state and political status quo. Thus each of us feels that we are freely choosing what is in fact being imposed upon us (164). Writing on Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’ Barry says, ‘Hegemony is like an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem ‘natural’ ...’ (164).

If the above tenets of Marxism are applied to this play, certain revelations come out. The two sexes of the society are in certain relationships, one of those is marriage. Elaborate mechanism is created to sanctify and to continue the institution of marriage. All the women characters in this play undergo severe strains through this institution. They believe that the ideological set up created for marriage, which they are expected to follow without questioning, confine their development as free individuals. They realize that they are given the impression of being soul-mate and chosen by their husbands and it is their responsibility to keep the lamp of culture bright. But the underlying fact is that, they are made to serve the husbands without

questioning their motive. These women characters raise voice against this tendency of men, give a wake-up call to women to come together to revolt against the established social code and authority and seek to change the present hierarchical relationship of husband and wife into one of companionship. They propose if love thrives in man-woman relationship, there will not be any necessity of the bondage of relationship under marriage. The main question is of love and that is why they challenge the ideology of marriage, which fails to guarantee them love.

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