

Emergence of Third Space: An Analysis of Muthal Naidoo's *Flight from the Mahabharath*

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Abstract: The South African Indian Theatre has been demarcated as a communal venture and with the exclusion of a few Indian women like Muthal Naidoo and SairaEssa, it has been monopolized by the Indian male voice. They trace it as a possibility to sketch out their predicament, to challenge the arrogation and muzzling power of their male counterparts. They utilise theatre as a weapon of emancipation. Muthal Naidoo's play *Flight from the Mahabharath* is a distinctive version of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* written from the standpoint of the leading female characters in the epic. While Draupadi, Radha, Subhadra, Kunthi, Hidimba, Urvashi, Uttarai, Ghandhari and other women conquer the centre stage the playwright unfailingly depicts the male characters too, but with a slight variation. Brihannala and Sikandi occupy the stage as the female versions of the male characters Arjuna and Amba respectively. These characters in pursuit of freedom, tired of the bondages and responsibilities thrust upon them, literally flee from the epic to create a space for them. The present paper attempts to explore the emergence of the Third Space, the concept propounded by the social theorist Homi Bhabha, in the play where the characters display sites of resistance and set up new structures of authority and political initiatives. The third space definitely enables the suppressed to plot their liberation.

Keywords: Theatre, Liberation, Resistance, Third Space, Suppressed, Homi Bhabha

Short Communication

The South African Indian Theatre has been demarcated as a communal venture and with the exclusion of a few Indian women like Muthal Naidoo and SairaEssa, it has been monopolized by the Indian male voice. They trace it as a possibility to sketch out their predicament, to challenge the arrogation and muzzling power of their male counterparts. They utilise theatre as a weapon of emancipation. Muthal Naidoo is the South African playwright, director and teacher who has a doctorate from Indiana University and has taught at the Washington University in St. Louis and at the Giyani College of Education in South Africa's Northern Province.

Muthal Naidoo's [1] play *Flight from the Mahabharath* is a distinctive version of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* written from the standpoint of the leading female characters in the epic. While Draupadi, Radha, Subhadra, Kunthi, Hidimba, Urvashi, Uttarai, Ghandhari and other women conquer the centre stage, the playwright unfailingly depicts the male characters too, but with a slight variation. Brihannala and Sikandi occupy the stage as the female versions of the male characters Arjuna and Amba respectively. These characters in pursuit of freedom, tired of the bondages and responsibilities thrust upon them, literally flee from

the epic to create a space for them. The ascribed roles of the women, under the slogan of culture and traditional preservation confine women to the private sphere. The play deliberately, in every manner, sheds the limitations drawn upon women by the patriarchal society. The present paper attempts to explore the emergence of the Third Space, the concept propounded by the social theorist Homi Bhabha, in the play where the characters display sites of resistance and set up new structures of authority and political initiatives. The third space definitely enables the suppressed to plot their liberation.

The play opens with Draupadi, one of the central characters, making the astonishing remark at the outset: "We did it! This is scene one of our new existence" (*Flight from the Mahabharath* 216). The sense of liberation is felt through the veiled resistance that is implicit in the words of Draupadi. Ganga agrees to Draupadi when she says: "This is our space" (216). Radha eagerly conveys to the audience: "Here I can speak. I have a voice. In the epic the *Mahabharath*, I was just a footnote" (216). Now that they are free, they have choices to make. Draupadi pulls off the wig and reveals her short, boyish hairstyle thereby averting the long held concept of long hair as one of the symbols of women's beauty. Ganga no longer needs the crown as a

décor and unhesitatingly throws it away. She even dares to question the “enslaving tradition of motherhood” (216). Ganga challenges the traditional bondages entrusted upon women and holds the male author of the epic, Vyasa responsible for her life’s events. She plainly outshines him through her sarcastic statement and even goes to the extent of criticising him:

Vyasa did. He wrote the Epic. Give him his due: He is a very skilful writer. What an intriguing introduction to the epic: a woman, actually a goddess, throwing her new born babies into the river year after year for seven years. Sensational! I was his instrument. I had to kill off babies that I would never have had in the first place. (216)

Ganga is brave enough to declare that she is reluctant to marry and have children and thereby “carry on the line” (225). This assertion definitely can be seen as an instance of resistance in the third space where the oppressed plot their liberation. Draupadi even goes to the extent of removing the blindfold of Gandhari to her recently attained sovereignty. Gandhari willingly ties herself to the tradition and tries to pull other women to her side. But it remains a futile attempt on her part, as a person who enters the third space will not, at any cost, return or cross the border. Accompanied by the female characters, the playwright expertly accommodates two male characters, though their female versions—Brihannala/ Arjuna and Sikandi/ Amba. They are also in pursuit of freedom who, like the female characters, long to enter the third space.

The women decide to stage a play. The play begins with Draupadi’s *swayamvara*. Radha acts the part of Duryodhana, the arch villain, who tries to abduct and marry Draupadi. On the contrary, Draupadi marries Arjuna, the poor nomad who lives in the forest with the grudging permission of Drupada, her father. Arjuna is Brihannala in the new version and surprisingly he refuses to be the husband of Draupadi. Even though the other characters force him to marry, he sticks to his own decision. He too steps in the third space and is acting in accord to his mind. Draupadi is once again captured by Duryodhana and places her before Gandhari: “Mother, look at the *bhiksha* we have brought” (224). Gandhari, the ignorant mother asks her sons to share the *bhiksha* among them. As in the epic Duryodhana and Dussasana begin to undress Sikandi who is playing the part of Draupadi. They succeed in removing Draupadi’s sari as Lord Krishna or any other God does not appear to save her chastity. The play takes an astonishing twist when both the brothers realise that they have undressed a man. The women thrive in mocking the brothers and never forget to celebrate their long cherished victory. They form novel strategies and cleverly erase the cultural and territorial boundaries fixed by the patriarchal society.

The women then move on to Ganga’s story where Ganga is forced by her son Bhishma to marry Santanu, his father in order to gain his identity. Ganga is a resilient woman who refuses to believe in the institution of marriage and the associated responsibilities:

Ganga: It was a matter of abort (sic) or be aborted. (*Pointing to the audience*) They don’t really know us, the women of the Mahabharath. If you ask them out there, they can only identify us as mother of, or sister of, but not as individuals in our own right. (228)

Ganga’s candid nature is clear when she expresses her refusal in making Sikandi the raconteur. She unflinchingly remarks: “Look Sikandi, we suffered long enough. Now we have taken charge of our lives, we cannot have a man come here and tell us what to do” (228). Ganga here possesses a counter-hegemonic agency and utilises her newly gained freedom for articulation of negotiation and meaning. She thereby questions the established categorisations of culture and identity.

The third space has not only promised them liberation, but also the power of dominance which allows them to narrate the story of Sikandi against his wish. The story of Sikandi reveals the circumstances that persuade the woman Amba to become a man to control her own destiny. Naidoo, through the characterisation of Sikandi, brings to the lime light certain women who go to the extent of shedding their identity so that they can enter into the third space. When Amba stands powerful discarding the traditional norms, Ambika and Ambalika stick to their selves and are ready to find satisfaction even in their suppression. However Sikandi finally succeeds in narrating his version of the story as the women recognise the freedom of the individual in the third space.

The next persona who comes to the forefront is Brihannala who refuses to accept the life of the great warrior, Arjuna. Naidoo makes him comment thus: “You love Arjun and I am not Arjun. I am a gay musician and dancer (Draupadi screams)” (235). Draupadi stands astounded at the remark of Brihannala. She decides to return to the epic once more to undertake a quest for Arjuna. There is a glint of irony when Hidimba [2] offers Draupadi the blindfold of Gandhari as she requires it as soon as she enters the epic. Hidimba speaks less throughout the play, but whenever she speaks, she has the power to arrest the audience. Hidimba appears in the story of Radha. She lives in Radha’s village and her spinsterhood is considered cynical by the villagers. Both Radha and Hidimba try hard to alter the mind of the villagers, but only succeed partially.

Draupadi returns to the new stage from the epic and describes her experiences in the epic:

I was back in that structure, locked into that pattern again. But this time I was aware of it. I found I was standing outside of myself, watching myself going through the motions. I couldn't get involved. I could see that we were all in the cages of customs and traditions. (240)

Draupadi, after enjoying the freedom of the third space, finds it hard to stay within the structure of customs and traditions. She realises the limitations of the previous life and says: "I missed you all and most of all, I missed myself" (241). The play ends at this point, when everybody happily prepares for the celebration.

Homi Bhabha's concept of third space helps to explain how the individuals negotiate the contradictory demands and polarities of their lives. The women in the play construct their culture and their new forms of articulation "transform the meanings of colonial inheritance into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future" (*Location of Culture* 56). These individuals

tend to erase any claims for inherent cultural purity and manage to inhabit the rim of a virtual reality thereby shifting psychic, cultural and territorial boundaries. The women possess "a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive and not merely reflective space that engenders new possibility" (36).

The representation of women, especially Draupadi and Ganga proves two undeniable facts: women can be represented as agents once they enter the realm of the "Third Space" and their representation have no primal unity or fixity. In this sense the play explores the utility of the Third Space that enables women to redefine their identity. As Bhabha says: Once it (third space) opens up, we are in a different space; we are making different presumptions and mobilizing emergent, unanticipated forms of historical agency (114).

REFERENCES

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