

PERFORMING PATRIARCHY IN THE PERSONAL/POLITICAL SPACE: A STUDY OF THE PLAY *MANGALAM*

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Abstract

The play Mangalam was first performed on 14 January 1994 and the role of Thangam was performed by Poile Sengupta herself in the play. Mangalam is Poile Sengupta's first play and it won a special prize in the Hindu-Madras Players playscripts competition in 1993. It was also performed twice by The Madras Players, an old English theatre group. The title of the play Mangalam is based on the character of a woman who was a victim of child sexual abuse, marital rape and domestic violence. When the play opens, she is already dead and the audience comes to know about her only through the other characters in her family.

Paper Identification



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Introduction

The play *Mangalam* deals with two contrasting milieus. The crux of the play deals with the politics within two different families from two different ways of life, from the women's perspective. It deals with serrated relationships behind ostensibly normal households, whether it

be a small town or in a modern cosmopolitan family both in South India. She used Shakespearean play within a play technique.

This play is a mirror to an Indian especially South – Indian women. The main theme of the play is the treatment of violence against women in patriarchal society and in family. The play *Mangalam* is divided into two acts. The first act takes place in a traditional Brahmin family. The second act is in a modern urban family. The women in both conditions face same problems.

Dramatic Technique of the Play *Mangalam*

There are two acts in the play and first act turns out to be a play within a play. In the dramatic technique of play within a play as used in *Mangalam*, the audience of the first act becomes the characters of the second Act who discuss the play and try to negotiate its relevance in their real life. Shashi Deshpande said in the Introduction that the two acts mirror each other in the play (xii). Sengupta mentions that she has used the technique of alienation in the play to suggest that “the world of domestic oppression and pain knows no socioeconomic boundary and [extends] across time” (“An Interview” 85). There are some poems within the play which are presented as a voice-over of a woman suggesting struggles and challenges faced by a woman in her life.

Performing Patriarchy

The playwright has mentioned in the introduction of the play that “It is about family politics, seen through the perspective of women” (*Women* 1). The play largely deals with the intricacies of private patriarchy. Patriarchy generates imbalance and differences between genders as within the structure of patriarchy there is always power or privilege on the one side and disability on the other. Patriarchy leads to the gender division of spaces which is discriminatory, oppressive and political. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as a system of social structures (historically situated) and practices (not an ‘event’ but a process) in which men (those in power) dominate, oppress and exploit women. Women’s body, sexuality and freedom are controlled and her spatial existence is manipulated. In the patriarchal system of family, marriage is arranged, forced and negotiated and it becomes a contested site of gender inequality and violence with financial dependency, sexual abuse, domestic violence, wife battering and marital rape as depicted in the play *Mangalam*. As the play opens Mani tells Revathy that his mother (*Mangalam*) never wanted his sister Usha to be humiliated like she used to be in her husband’s house (3). It suggests that *Mangalam*’s death was not a natural one and all the family members were aware of her sufferings.

Mangalam was a victim of child sexual abuse and the abuser was not a stranger but her elder sister Thangam's husband. Having no fault of her, she was forced to marry to a stranger when she was pregnant and her husband Dorai made her whole life as hell when he came to know about her pregnancy. Dorai justifies his act by saying that he was cheated by Mangalam and her father so he took revenge. In Act One, in the play within the play, Mangalam is silent and dead already but her sufferings and silent resistance throughout her life are voiced through the discussion of the other characters. As the female Voice-over speaks, "Women die many kinds of death; men do not know this" (11), Mangalam was silent to the series of injustice and exploitation committed against her as she was raped by her own relative in a very young age and next she was forced to marry a stranger by her father to protect the honour of the family. Throughout her life, she was punished by her husband Dorai and called a whore for no fault on her part. Feminist scholars have questioned the idea of bourgeois respectability that marriage confers upon women where keeping up appearances is more important than having affection and peace in the family life. Though Mangalam has spent her whole life in fear and silence, she never wanted to risk her children's lives or to find them in trouble in any manner. Germaine Greer argued that "every girl child is conceived as a whole woman but from the time of her birth to her death she is progressively disabled. A woman's first duty to herself is to survive this process, then to recognise it, then to take measures to defend herself against it" (4-5). In the absence of any alternative or any choice of her own with the patriarchal system, Mangalam accepted her subordination to the patriarchs, first to her father and next, to the rule of her husband Dorai. But she prayed that she should die before Dorai so that he would suffer after her death.

Marriage is seen as a central ambition in the system of patriarchy. Usha, Mangalam's daughter was forced to leave her studies by her father Dorai and marry in a rich family where she has to face abusive husband and in-laws. The customs of arranged marriage is questioned by the playwright as she hints how Usha's in-laws came to see Usha and find her suitability for their son before marriage and her mother-in-law checked whether she has long hair or not by pulling her plaited hair (16). Usha was given into marriage without her consent as she wanted to marry a college lecturer. Usha lived a miserable life in her in-laws' house. Seeing her mother's fate and Usha's condition, the younger daughter Chitra took a decision for herself before her family fixes up her marriage. She chose to run away and marry a person of her choice in the court. The major difference between Mangalam and Usha is that Mangalam never dared to come out of her abusive marriage whereas Usha, being educated, continued her resistance through her voice and

poems. At the end of the Act one, she dared to leave her husband's house and came back alone to her parent's house. She enters into the house by saying, "I've come back home, Appa" (38). However, it was not an end to her problems as her father Dorai could never support her decision but within the uncertainties, she still dared to take a decision for herself.

The word "home" is significantly suggestive as Usha could not find her husband's place as a *home* for her but a prison house where she was ruled, abused and tortured every day. Kate Millet critique Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865) and his idea of home and women that women are loved, respected and treated as royalty and they have nothing to complain of "so long as they stay at home", a place where a woman is sheltered and protected from all danger and temptations (65, 68). She refers to Mill who said that women are "bondservant" and domestic slave within marriage and the history of the marriage system is based on sale or enforcement and it is feudalistic (73, 77). In the context of African-American women, bell hooks said that the home is a site of resistance (McDowell 18). She connects personal with the political showing the power politics governing the personal space too. Chitra understood the familial politics and the tradition of injustice against women and she suggested her resistance by wearing her mother Mangalam's wedding sari on her own wedding day. Chitra deliberately leaves her assigned domain, her father's home and she chose to take the risk to create her own space. It also suggests the diversity in the portrayal of female characters in the play by the playwright and suggests that women conceptualise reality differently and they are not all alike.

Ruskin defines man's area and his characteristics too by saying that he is open to the outside world to encounter all peril and trial and it is to him that failure, wounds and conquest belong which hardened him also (qtd. in Millet 68). Though Ruskin and Mill both accept that man are exploited too but it is only Mill who adds, "female is subject to greater indignities" and she is the only creature over whom a man can claim superiority and "prove it by crude force" (qtd. in Millet 74). In the play, Dorai felt humiliated, cheated and trapped due to his poverty as he got married to a girl from a rich family who was pregnant which was revealed to him after marriage. He received a lot of money as dowry including a house to live and a good job which made him blind to understand the situation before the marriage. Violence is equated to privilege under the patriarchal system. Dorai not only made Mangalam suffer but also had sexual relationships with other women. When Thangam asked him about his extra-marital relationships he casually rationalised it by saying, "It is different for a man" (35). Sylvia Walby quotes Jackson who suggested that men are able to negotiate the meaning of a situation so as to excuse

themselves from illicit conduct (115). The playwright suggests in the play that although within the system of marriage both the partners suffer if there is any problem in between but it is always the woman who is disadvantaged greater than man.

Dorai failed not only as a husband but as a father too. Chitra's elopement has hurt his patriarchal sense of ego and disrespected his family honour. He calls his daughter Chitra a whore and blames Mangalam and her nurturing of children for the situation even after her death (20). He left his job and minimised his outer exposure by closing himself in his house after Chitra's incident and always shown as sick and lying on the bed. Till the end, Dorai was unable to understand the situation and experiences of any women in his family. His disturbed and violent acts were interpreted positively within the patriarchal system, hence, Dorai was himself unable to comprehend the situation and his own troubled and damaged self. bell hooks calls patriarchy a "social disease" which is assaulting the male body and his life (and not only a woman's) and it promotes insanity and psychological ills and troubles in their lives (1-4). She defines patriarchy as "a political-social system that *insists* that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially women" (1). If patriarchy were truly rewarding for men, Dorai would have ended with satisfaction and peace in his life.

Mangalam portrays women of two different generations yet finding themselves with the same challenges and violence related to their body and gender. The traditional woman of the first generation is self-sacrificing, mute yet 'uneasy' and the woman of the next generation is found as educated, "urbanized, exposed to life in public sphere" (Turnaturi 258), influenced by the reformists views and new individualistic philosophies yet being the 'uneasy woman' who still face gender based violence. Sumati in Act 2 is a victim of molestation and sexual assault, once by her own fiancé and by her father's friend Nari regardless of the fact that she is a well educated woman who is a newly appointed college lecturer in English Literature. The play suggests that "the violence against women cuts across economic, cultural, age, and class groups (Sengupta, "An Interview" 79).

Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement "One is not born a woman; one becomes one" is rightly depicted in Thangam's character in the play with the play *Mangalam*. In patriarchy, it is the man who has 'power over' the others but women also participate in the nourishing and keeping the patriarchal structure intact for example, Thangam in the play (in Act one) is the advocate of customary rules of patriarchy. In the first Act (play within the play), Thangam is

portrayed as an elderly widow with shaved head who is always dressed in white. She is always anxious about Chitra's marriage. She is rude to Revathy, her daughter-in-law and maintains a traditional hostile relationship with her. She suggested Revathy, "A woman who is afraid will never go wrong" (30). However, she is a strong woman who is bold enough to speak against the injustice happened to her sister Mangalam and she is not threatened by Dorai's words and stands against him. Dorai completely dislikes her presence in his house. Though she was unhappy with Chitra's elopement and the news of her registered marriage, she asked Dorai to accept Chitra and her husband as his son-in-law even if he is a non-Brahmin boy and requested him to arrange a small reception for them but Dorai denied. In the act two, Thangam is modern and sensible. When Nari mentioned to Sreeni about their college pledge to marry their children together, Thangam sharply responded as, "We can't plan our children's lives, Nari. Not any more. Their choices have to be their own" (60). Thangam decides to leave her husband Sreeni when she came to know about his extra-marital affair unlike Mangalam in act one who kept silent even after knowing about her husband's affairs.

Toril Moi notes that "The fact that women often enact the roles of patriarchy has prescribed for them does not prove that patriarchal analysis is right" (qtd. in Hall 98). Gerda Lerner answers some of the questions as she said that patriarchy is not the men's work alone but women themselves participated in their own subordination due to specific reasons: the absence of the right to be educated, economic dependence and lack of feminist consciousness due to denial of knowledge of their own history. Hence, she chose to call women's 'subordination' instead of women's 'oppression' which depicts women completely as a victim with no resistance (Nielsen 229).

The Act One which is a play within the play suggests that Usha was made to leave her studies and get married by her father. She was left to be oppressed by her husband and in-laws with no other alternative and economic support. But in the case of Sumati also in Act Two who is convent educated, a newly appointed lecturer in college and a person with feminist consciousness, there is no explicit change in the society. Despite being educated and modern in her approach to life, Sumati becomes a victim of molestation (in Act two) by her uncle Nari which reminds of Mangalam who was raped at a very young age by her brother-in-law. Hence, the play suggests that the approach of men, especially an elderly man like Nari who lived abroad but having the same set of mind towards a woman, as an object of desire. Sexual assault or rape is shown mostly as the climax of dominant narratives (questioned and contested by the feminist

thinkers) which suggests women's vulnerability and gives strength to Freudian idea of anatomy as destiny. In the play, Sumati is a victim of sexual abuse and she became quiet and enclosed within herself after the incident as she hesitates to sit and talk to anybody including her friends. As a girl, she faced discrimination since her childhood by her own parents in comparison to her brother Suresh. Although she gets the support of her father Sreeni to do the job, Thangam gave her consent half-heartedly.

The play *Mangalam* portrays not only men of two different generations only but being of different kinds. Sengupta has not essentialized the idea of 'man' and 'woman' as a homogenous category. In the play, there are traditional, rigid, tough, insensitive elderly patriarchs like Dorai (in the first Act), Shreeni and Nari (second Act) who are moral police of their wife and daughters but they do not mind having affair outside marriage and even gazing other young girls outside. And the playwright also portrays men like Suresh and Vikram who are light-hearted and ready for the dialogues. But Suresh is a philanderer and he persuades girls for pleasure whereas Vikram is affectionate and has respect for women and their opinions. He observes people keenly and has a sensibility to understand the situation. He dislikes Suresh's careless approach in his relationship with women since he believes that relationship between man and woman is not a game or a sexual conquest but a commitment. The true intimacy and connection are missing in the relationship which is indicated by Vikram in the play which is replaced by the complex tie in terms of domination and submission, collusion and manipulation within the patriarchal structure as bell hooks points out (5).

The playwright has brilliantly used the dramatic technique of juxtaposing a conservative middle-class family with a 'modern' urban convent educated one. It suggests that although the society has been 'modernised' in terms of education, living standard and other material things, the patriarchal set of mind has yet to change. Domestic space, which is the marker of that tradition sets for the preservation of women's chastity, is revealed as a space of sexual violence as presented in the play. In the second act, Sumati is led to remark, "the moment a woman doesn't fit into the category of being a mother or a sister, she's baggage.... sexual baggage" (Sengupta, *Women* 44). Gerda Lerner suggests that educational deprivation of women in the history has been the major cause of women's submission to the patriarchal suppressions (223). However, there are several other mechanisms which maintain patriarchy in the modern times that is discussed in detail by Sylvia Walby in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Walby argues that the concept of patriarchy is indispensable to analyse gender inequality (1). Patriarchy is historical

and dynamic though its degree and forms are changing. Earlier women's subordination was due to their confinement to the private sphere (to rear children and due to lack of education and isolation from other women) but private patriarchy has paved the way to public patriarchy at present as Walby has divided patriarchy into two: Private Patriarchy and Public Patriarchy (174). Private patriarchy is exclusionary (non-admission and active exclusion from public arenas) while public patriarchy is segregationist in its strategy (178). She clarifies that private and public forms of patriarchy constitute "a continuum rather than a rigid dichotomy" (180).

Sylvia Walby gives six key forms of patriarchal structure: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions (religion, media and education) and explained, "the elimination of any one does not lead to the demise of the system as a whole" and according to the space and time some of the structures can be more significant than the others (177). Walby finds the change and shift in patriarchal strategy "from exclusionary to segregationist and subordinating" (179) in the twentieth century that is more complex, implicit and intriguing in its structure. Some feminist thinkers believe that women's oppression through sexuality has been intensified in the period after first-wave feminism through media projection of women as a beauty object and a sexual object and widespread availability of pornography (Walby 195-197). In the play *Mangalam*, the women characters are trapped within the various forms of patriarchal structure but among them, a patriarchal relation with sexuality is most explicit which leads to male violence and women's sexual objectification. The playwright suggests that the patriarchal system is not only about women's subordination and the nature of the relationship between man and woman but it also sculpts men (their psyche and behaviours) as particular kind of social being and their relationship not only with the other fellow beings but with the power dynamics.

In the play, the female characters are not portrayed as the 'victims' but as the 'survivors' and Sengupta's male characters are not coloured in complete black and white either. Although she said that nothing has changed much in terms of women's status in the society and cases of violence against them even in the new generation of literate and working women, she also marks the difference between women of two different generations. Her female characters do not submit to the violence silently but they become an agent of change who are showing resistance to the violence. Women characters in her plays are able to struggle as well as express themselves. They expose the hypocrisy that often deifies and exploits women's body simultaneously.

Unlike *Mangalam* which is a long play based on family drama with a number of characters, Poile Sengupta's play *Alipha* is a one-hour short play, having two characters only. The play *Alipha* was first performed on 12 September 2001 in the co-direction of the playwright Poile Sengupta. The play is about the personal tragedy of the characters: Man and Woman as the playwright suggest (Sengupta, *Women* 215). The characters manifest the idea of 'man' and 'woman' where one is dominant and other is subordinate respectively but none of the characters lived a satisfactory life with peace.

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