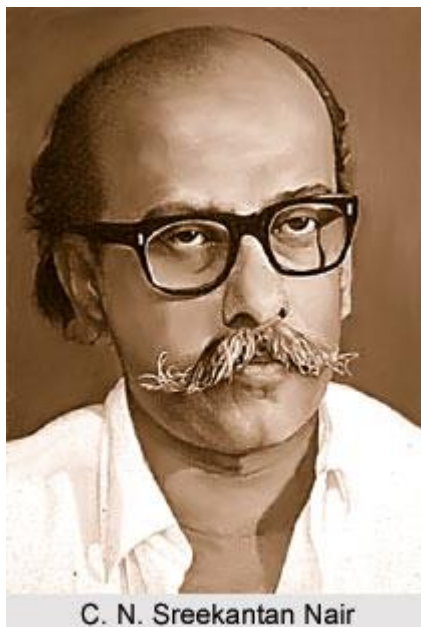


Treatment of Myth in C N Sreekantan Nair's *Kanchana Sita*

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Abstract

Indian myths and the epics have been constantly re-created in retellings. Drama is one of the genres of literature which has made profound use of these. C.N. Sreekantan Nair's *Kanchana Sita* is a well-known play which is written based on the epic Ramayana. *Kanchana Sita* earned Sreekantan Nair the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 1962. The play has been later adapted into a film with the same name by G. Aravindan.

The play is the re-interpretation of the *Uttara-Kanda*, the seventh and last book of Ramayana. By using this part as the major theme of the play, Sreekantan Nair provides a strong counterpoint to Rama's authority by portraying the unhappy incidents such as the unlawful death of Shambuka and the withdrawal of Sita into the lap of Mother Earth. The play questions the discrimination of gender and the evil aspect of caste system. This re-telling version of the epic is significant as it uses the feministic perspective to recount various incidents in the play.

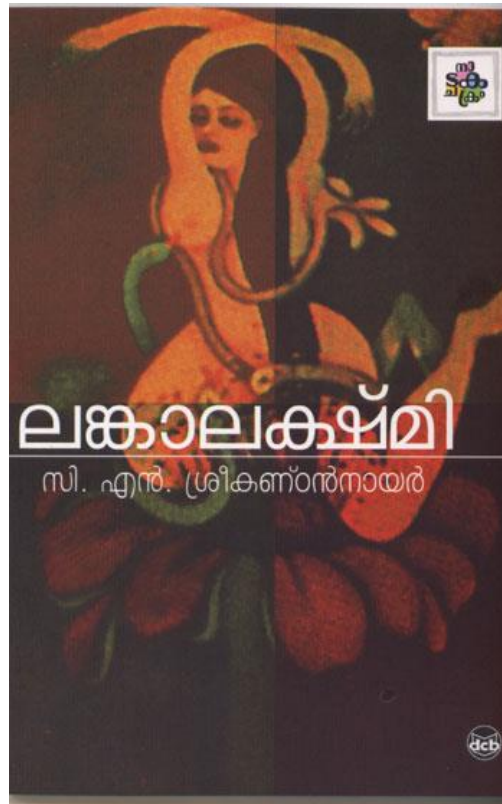
Keywords : C N Sreekantan Nair, Retellings, Indian Drama, Feminism

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Introduction



C. N Sreekantan Nair is a renowned playwright from Kerala. He, along with C.J. Thomas, is known to be the major innovator of Malayalam drama. Both of them are responsible for the advent of first truly modernist plays in Malayalam. Sreekantan Nair is probably best known for his *Ramayana* trilogy *Kanchana Sita* (1961), *Lankalakshmi* and *Saketham* which are based on the epic *Ramayana*. While *Kanchana Sita* brings out the philosopher in Sreekantan Nair, *Lankalakshmi* and *Saketham* highlight the playwright and poet in him. Each play focuses on the diversity of one of the three *gunas* in man known as *sathvic*, *rajas* and *tamas* respectively (“C.N”). *Kanchana Sita* earned Sreekantan Nair the Kendra Sahitya Academi Award in the year 1962. The play has been later adapted into a film with the same name by G Aravindan.

Kanchana Sita can be considered the magnum opus of Sreekantan Nair. The play is the re-interpretation of the *Uttara-Kanda*, the seventh and last book of *The Ramayana* which is regarded as a later addition to Valmiki’s original version of the epic. By using this part as the major theme of the play, Sreekantan Nair provides a strong counterpoint to Rama’s authority by portraying the unhappy incidents such as the unlawful death of Shambuka and the withdrawal of Sita into the lap of Mother Earth. Sreekantan Nair treats all characters in

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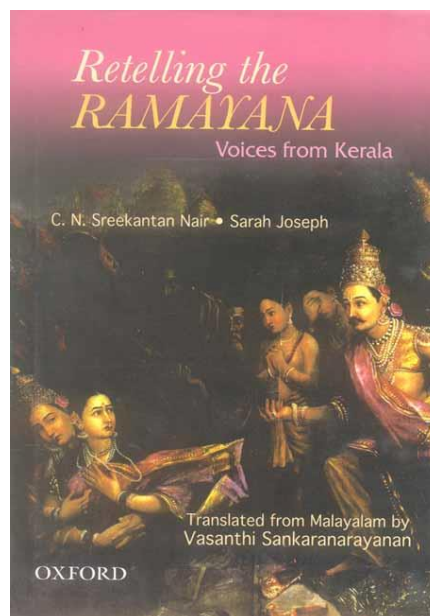
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the play basically as human beings and gives prime importance to the humanistic values rather than any abstract ideals which govern the life of man. The play elucidates the complexities of dharma and the sacrifices it demands by adhering to it. It also questions the discrimination of gender and the evil aspect of caste system. This re-telling version of the epic is significant as it uses the feministic perspective to recount various incidents in the play.

Significance of the Title

The title of the play *Kanchana Sita* carries abundance of meaning in the play. ‘Kanchana Sita’ literally means the golden image of Sita, which Rama uses as a substitute for her presence in the *Aswamedhayaga*. But it indirectly refers to the position of women during the epic age in the male dominated society in India. Though women were possessed by men like the golden images during that time, they were denied many rights as human beings. Even Sita, the wife of the king of *Ayodhya*, had been denied the basic consideration as an individual. Being charged with the offences she is not guilty of, Sita was abandoned in a wild forest at a time when she was in the last stage of her pregnancy. Kausalya’s reply, when Urmila questions why Sita had to undergo such serious violations being the queen of a country, is very significant in this context. She says, “but the queen is just a queen. She is not the king. The queen is a woman” (Sreekantan 24).

Feminist Approach



The author, in the play, gives ample importance to the female characters like Kausalya and Urmila who have fewer roles in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The play itself begins with the exchange of disapproving statements of these two characters on the deeds of Rama and the whole *Raghuvamsa*, who do not bother to sacrifice their women as offerings for the eminence of their race. Urmila, who appears throughout the play, is presented as a very strong character and she seems to show no hesitation in confronting Rama to seek justice for Sita. When everyone compels Rama to take a new wife for conducting the rituals related to *Aswamedhayaga*, Urmila even dares to ask why Rama, who is renowned for his sense of dharma, does not punish himself for preferring to accept a new bride after throwing away his dutiful wife Sita to the mercy of wild animals in the forest. Though Sita's presence is felt all through the play she, in fact, appears only in two scenes. When the second time she appears in the last scene, she is asked to prove her chastity once again by Rama and it ends up with her return to the lap of Mother Earth. The play ends with Valmiki's comment, "Sita does not perish... Sita is nature itself" (Sreekantan 93).

Purusha and Prakriti Concepts

Sreekantan Nair has drawn the concept of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* in *Kanchana Sita*. This concept has its genealogy in the *Samkhya-Yoga* school of Indian philosophy. The play conceives *Purusha* as the masculine self (Rama) while *Prakriti* as the female animating power of the universe (Sita). It emphasizes the idea that *Purusha* is not distinct from *Prakriti*. This notion is clearly brought out in the film version of *Kanchana Sita* when Rama immerses into the waters of *Sarayu*, and merges and be one with *Prakriti*. Malayalam version of the *Ramayana* known as *Adhyathma Ramayana* by Ezhuthachan also views Rama as *Purusha* and Sita as *Prakriti*.

Sreekantan Nair criticises the *brahmanical* privilege and political tyranny throughout the play. Sage Vasishtha, who appears as the embodiment of love and compassion in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, turns to be Rama's influential advisor whose only purpose in life seems to be the unfair ascendancy of *Brahmins*. The characterisation of Rama and Bharata has been deviated from the traditional standards. Bharata is not portrayed as someone who obeys anything and everything that Rama says. While Rama accepts the supremacy of *Brahmins*, Bharata repudiates it strongly. Moreover, he disagrees with Rama's blind obligation to the conventions created by the *Brahmins*. He asks,

...learning the Vedas and performing of penance have been denied even to *kshatriyan* Aryans. The *kshatriyans* themselves are slavishly assisting the upholding of the law that the *brahmins* created against the *kshatriyans*. Oh, great king, has the king become a servant of the priest? (Sreekantan 49)

In *Kanchana Sita*, Bharata is not the only one who criticises Rama. Rama is being criticised by almost all the characters in the play including Hanuman, the greatest devotee of Rama. Hanuman questions the justice in disowning Sita, and he opposes the code of dharma which Rama has been following as the king of *Ayodhya*. He tells Rama,

You are inventing a new interpretation for statecraft, you are putting it to test and making it practically usable ... May you be victorious! But... I fear that this statecraft which breaks and smashes relationships of the soul is an eternal curse to this earth (Sreekantan 83).

Rama as Tragic Hero

In *Kanchana Sita*, the character of Rama comes down from the status of an epic hero into the status of a tragic hero. Rama is not a perfect person in this play; he is portrayed as an ordinary person with inherent nobility in him. He is brave, yet vulnerable and unfortunate at the same time. He is caught between *rajadharma* and his own dharma as an individual, and he vainly struggles to unify both. His misfortune is the result of his own action and he is destined to suffer for it. This suffering of Rama, which he has to undergo for committing an error in judgement, arouses pity and fear in the audience.

Film Version

The play, *Kanchana Sita*, has been made into a feature-length Malayalam movie in the same name by G Aravindan in the year 1977. The film was shot in the interior tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh. The roles of the epic heroes are played by *Rama Chenchu* tribal people, who claim to be the descendants of the *Ikshvaku* clan to which Rama belonged. The film retells the epic from a feminist perspective. Sita is never actually seen in the movie, but her virtual presence is evoked through the different aspects of nature. Poet and scholar Ayyappa Panicker views Sita's absence as typical of Aravindan's style, in which there is a conscious, meticulous effort 'not to communicate in order to communicate.' Aravindan also interweaves the concept of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*. The film ends with the depiction of Rama's last journey,

the *Mahaprasthanā*, in which he walks into the river with fire in his hand and becomes one with Sita, the all-pervading nature. Sita is portrayed not as a woman or an individual, but as an eternal concept in the film. The film earned Aravindan the National Film Award for Best Direction (“Kanchana”).

Conclusion

Indian mythologies and the epics have been constantly re-created in retellings. Drama is one of the genres of literature which has made profound use of myths. In India, Bharata’s *Natyashastra* is considered to be the earliest work on drama and theatre. The first chapter of *Natyashastra* refers to an ancient myth and implies that the drama was created by Gods for the benefit of mankind. The ultimate purpose of drama is the depiction of humanity. Sreekantan Nair is aware of this fact, and that may be the reason why he makes the character of Valmiki pronounce these words in *Kanchana Sita*, “Never shut your eyes towards the human life. It will reveal new truths” (Sreekantan 64).

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