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Feminist Approach to the Narrative of Madhavi in Bhisham Sahni' Play Madhavi

Abstract: Mythical stories are not lies, rather a mode of retrospections and going back to time and realize its significance in present scenario. One of such mythical narratives occurs in Bhisham Sahni's play *Madhavi*. The play recounts an ancient tale from the *Mahabharata*. It begins with Munikumar Galav who has to fulfil a promise made to his guru, Vishwamitra. Yayati, who was a king once upon a time but has now turned into an ashramite sage, is father of Madhavi whom he gives away to Galav in an act of generosity. She is blessed with a divine power to regain her youth and virginity and is capable of mothering great kings. She has been portrayed merely as a pawn in patriarchal society where male chauvinism and notions led her life to discontentment and full of tragedy. She is a valuable asset to men who she lives with. In the end, she dejectedly walks away from everyone denying any other fulfillment of others' wishes.

Keywords: Myth, History, Madhavi, and Indian Feminism

Bhisham Sahni (8 August 1915 – 11 July 2003) was a Hindi writer, playwright, and actor, most famous for his novel and television screenplay *Tamas* ("Darkness, Ignorance"), a

powerful and passionate account of the Partition of India. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan for literature in 1998, and Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 2002. His play *Madhavi* was first published in 1982 in Hindi and was later translated in English by Ashok Bhalla in 2002.

The present paper uses method of textual analysis and discourse analysis, the views and speeches of characters have been analysed and interpreted in the light of feministic views. The discourse of three major characters have been studied to look into the gender discrimination and how the male voices subjugated the voice of female up to a point where cost of freedom for women is losing it all. The play is a narrative of condition of women in ancient times which in many ways have not changed even today. She is treated as nothing more than an inanimate object throughout the play first by her father who gives her away as a gift to a man whom she did not even know and then that man (Galav) uses her like a like an object for sale in barter system.

In his play, *Madhavi* (1982) Sahni draws upon a story from *Mahabharata*. Munikumar Galav, arrogant disciple of sage Vishwamitra, insists on giving him *gurudakshina*, even though the sage wants nothing. In exasperation Vishwamitra asks for 800 white *ashwamedhi* horses with black ears. Only 600 such horses exist in Aryavarta, three kings owning 200 each. Advised by Garud Dev, the Vahana of Bhagwan Vishnu, Galav goes to King Yayati, who now lives in an *ashram*, but has a prodigious reputation for generosity. Yayati gives him his daughter Madhavi as a gift who is blessed with two boons: she can renew her virginity and youth whenever she wants and each son she bears will be a *chakravarti king*. So Galav gives her away to one horse-owning king after another for just one year in return for the 200 *ashwamedhi* horses they possess. She in turn gives them each a son. Still they are 200 short. So Madhavi goes and offers herself to Vishwamitra for a year and he dispenses with the last 200 horses.

The tragedy of Madhavi starts when Garud Dev advises Galav to go to Yayati for help. Galav is so proud and of such a high ego that he cannot ask for forgiveness even from his guru Vishwamitra; Yayati is such a lover of flattery and of such a high ego that to get famous in the world he gifts his daughter to Galav; and Rishi Vishwamitra is so keen on teaching a lesson to Galav that he cannot forgive Galav and instead uses Madhavi for a year just like three kings.

The males, full of themselves, preserve their "reputations" — Yayati for generosity, Galav for his *gurudakshina* pledge. Galav is insensitive to her moving from harem to harem, leaving a son behind each time. To satisfy their ego in the name of duty and charity they all make Madhavi sacrifice her body and soul. Her character develops from an innocent girl in the beginning to that of a mature, disillusioned and bold woman who leaves all in the end when she realizes the true nature of her lover Galav.

The play is a narrative about duty, obligation and sacrifice but no one makes sacrifices except Madhavi and all the males do perform the form of duty which suits their respective ego.

Yayati: Charity versus Ego

Yayati is a king who is living a retired life of an ascetic in forest and who is proud to be known as one of the most charitable kings in Aryavrata. Though he has chosen a life of an ascetic yet he is not comfortable in the forest. He still wants to be praised as he used to get in court by courtiers, as one of the Ashramite says:

“Ashramite: You miss being praised by everyone Maharaj. There are no courtiers here to surround you and sing your praises. You miss those who flatter your ego. That is why you are so unhappy here.”

Galav comes to Yayati seeking for help and for finding 800 ashwamedhi horses, when he learns that Yayati does not have horses he gets unhappy and says that he has come to wrong

Yayati and that true Yayati would have helped her. Yayati's ego is hurt, he is more concerned about his name and fame than anything else he says:

“Yayati: Now even a beggar mocks me. He is disappointed in me. Yayati is no longer a generous soul, but an ordinary and flawed human being. Karna shall be remembered for his generosity, Yudhisthir for his nobility, Harishchandra for his truthfulness, but Yayati....”

He is so keen on saving his name and becoming known as most generous that he does not lose a moment or blink an eye before deciding to give away his own and only daughter as a gift:

“Yayati:Galav, I cannot give you eight hundred horses but I can gift you my only daughter. She has many virtues. Any king would be glad to give you eight hundred ashwamedhi horses in exchange for her...”

In this way he not only gives her away as a gift but advises Galav to put her on sale in exchange for 800 horses. Her whole being is assessed by her own father just to that. His decision does not go unquestioned. Madhavi puts the first question against his decision, she says, “If mother were alive, would she let you gift me away like this?” Even the ashramites are not happy and one ashramite questions Yayati's sense of duty, he says, “You didn't do your duty, Maharaj. You gave her away as a gift to satisfy your ego and to ensure that people continue to praise your generous soul.”

Yayati's friend Mareech tell him about the conditions in which Madhavi is living. He informs him that to obtain all the horses she may have to live with many kings as no single king had more than 200 horses. At this too Yayati does not show his concern about his daughter but is interested only about his praise, fame and reputation. He says:

“Yayati:.... Tell me, what do people in Uttarakhand think of my generosity? Do they know about my gift? Do they say that Yayati is a great and generous soul who gave away his only daughter as a gift?”

Mareech unsuccessfully requests him to do something to help Madhavi when she is living with King of Ayodhya so that she need not live any other king for more horses, Mareech says:

“Mareech: That Madhavi will have to live with other kings for the remaining horses. It is not right, Maharaj. You should consider your reputation. After all, Madhavi is daughter of a king. The right thing for her will be to live with the king of Ayodhya.”

Vishwamitra: the Unforgiving Teacher

Vishwamitra is Galav's guru who in a moment of anger asks for 800 ashwamedhi horses as guru-dakshina. He knows that no one in Aryavrata has 800 ashwamedhi horses still asks for such guru-dakshina so that he can make Galav humble. But he also knows that Galav is too obstinate and too proud to ask for forgiveness and Vishwamitra too have his own ego to satisfy, so knowing well that Galav will not be able to give him his guru-dakshina he does not take back his words.

He is well aware of the ordeals of Madhavi and he knows that she has to live with different kings to get horses but he too does not feel pity for Madhavi. Galav's friend Tapas requests Vishwamitra to free Galav from the obligation but Vishwamitra does not listen to him:

“Tapas: Let him. You should at least show him mercy, besides you also know what means he is using to obtain those horses. He is trading a young girl for them.

Vishwamitra: I know. She is Yayati's daughter.”

Further, when many ashwamedhi horses died due to flood he started buying the horses so that Galav will not be able to procure them. And so, a time comes when there are no horses left but those with Vishwamitra, knowing this Madhavi approaches Vishwamitra to offer herself for one year in exchange for remaining horses:

“Madhavi: You already have six hundred horses, Maharaj. In place of the remaining two hundred horses...

Vishwamitra: Yes, tell me. Don't hesitate.

Madhavi: In place of the remaining two hundred horses, let me live with you.”

If he wanted he would have, even at the last point, taken pity and shown mercy on Madhavi by letting her free and giving her horses as he was ultimately going to get them back from Galav but he neither shows mercy nor pity on Madhavi and keeps her with him for one year in exchange for the horses.

Galav: Obstinate and too Proud Pupil and Insensitive and Selfish Lover

Galav, a pupil of Vishwamitra, is an obstinate person who feels ashamed at the thought of asking for forgiveness from his guru but does not feel shame when he trades a girl in exchange for horses to three kings and it is because of his high headedness that Madhavi has to live with his guru Vishwamitra as well. While following his duty towards his guru he forgets his duty towards humanity and fellow human beings and in the name of duty he treats a girl as an object with which he can buy horses.

His obstinate nature is not hidden from anyone. His guru Vishwamitra says, “You don't know Galav. He is a very arrogant young man.” When he is advised by Yayati in the very beginning but he gets angry and says that he has come to wrong Yayati. Even Madhavi advises him, “How can one be insulted by one's guru? You should feel honoured even if he curses you.” He feels attracted towards Madhavi from the moment he gets her but he is still determined

to use her, he says, "Madhavi is only an instrument to help me to fulfil my vow.... nothing more..."

He knows that Madhavi loves him but is so insensitive towards her that he chides her even when she has come to him leaving all the comforts of court and her first son away, but being a mother she misses her son, on this Galav says:

"Galav: I didn't realize that you would become such a coward the moment you gave birth to your son. Perhaps that is why women can never take risk nor be entrusted with a great task."

However, his professed love is shallow. He is attracted by her beauty and even though she gives up everything for him and his vow, he does not value her unconditional love towards him. After she enables him to fulfil his vow, Yayati arranges a swayanwar for Madhavi where Galav is present as well. In the beginning when he has not seen Madhavi he is very eager to meet her and is ready to marry her as he knows that she can regain her beauty when she wants. He is restless to meet her, he says, "I haven't seen her for more than a year....I've felt like a fish out of water without her. You can't imagine how depressed I am without her...."

But as soon as he sees her that her face has lost its colour and is wrinkled and there are dark circles under her eyes and she looks like a middle aged woman his attitude towards her changes drastically. He asks Madhavi again and again to perform the necessary rituals to regain her beauty:

"Galav: Yes, but you have been granted with a boon, Madhavi! Since you can regain your youth and your virginity why aren't....? Why haven't you performed the necessary rituals?"

He does not like her reply when Madhavi says, "For whom, Galav? Now I want to be just the way I am, with you. Why should I hide anything from you?" When he is sure that Madhavi is

not going to perform the ritual he takes a u-turn from his standing that shows his falseness he says:

“Galav: Madhavi, I can’t marry you even if I wanted to.

Madhavi (shocked): Why? Is that also a part of your duty? Is it?

.....

Galav: But how can I marry a woman who has lived with my guru at his ashram?”

However, Madhavi reveals that she was just testing him that she says:

“Madhavi:..... I was only trying to look into your heart, Galav. Don’t be hurt. Do you really believe that I would come to the man I love with all my being as an old woman? Even I have duty towards you. Even love has some rights and demands which must be fulfilled. (smiles) You are free Galav.”

But again he shows his treacherous character and turns his stand as he knows that she will regain her youth and beauty. He says, “No, Madhavi. You can regain your youth; you have the power. I shall consider myself blessed if you would agree to marry me.”

Madhavi: Innocent, Selfless, Sacrificing, Bold and Courageous

Madhavi, the protagonist of the play, is subjected to great misery and pain by those who are closest to her; first given by her father to a stranger Galav as gift and then given by Galav to kings and his own guru in exchange for horses and after all the pain and sufferings he refuses to marry her when he feels that she has grown old and is not willing to regain her youth. However, after knowing the truth of his heart she herself refuses to marry him though he tries again to convince her to marry him.

She is the one who truthfully performs her duty without any complain about it. She goes through all the ordeals in hope of gaining love and care of the man she loves. She says:

“Madhavi: (smiles) You are doing everything possible to pay off your debt, aren't you? Why do you think I am doing all this?

Galav: Why?

Madhavi: To win your affection....Come let's go, Galav.”

She is always hopeful that a time would come when she would be free from all the obligations and will be free to live with the man she loves. She sacrifices not only the girl and woman in her but also the mother in her as she gives her sons so that she can enable Galav to have horses. She lives in palace of Ayodhya and is asked by the king to marry him but she refuses the offer so that she can help Galav in fulfilling his obligation and though she is in pain but hope of being with Galav gives her courage:

“Madhavi: What a strange game is this, Galav? I feel that I am being taken to a dungeon instead of a palace... but all this will pass soon....I shall count each day, Galav...Who knows when we'll meet again! ...Take care of yourself...and don't worry about me...remember me...don't forget me....”

She is the one who lost most but gained nothing, she realizes this and says:

“Madhavi: No, Galav. You don't walk down the path yourself, but force others to do so. And the real irony is that world calls you an ascetic who seeks the truth and my father a generous soul. And me? A capricious and emotional woman who can't be trusted. Isn't that so?”

Her sacrifice is not acknowledged by anyone. She faces humiliation whenever she goes to a king. She is examined by kings like an animal or an ornament, her face, body and voice are examined to determine whether she is good enough. She faces all the humiliations, leaving all her dignity so that she can help Galav but later she realizes that he was only attracted by her physical beauty just like the others.

Conclusion

Madhavi is a woman who is dutiful as she fulfils her duty towards her father and her lover, she is courageous as she does not falter from the path of pain and humiliation just so can help her lover Galav, she is selfless and loves him unconditionally in hope that he may love her as and who she is but she is disillusioned when she learns that he is no better than all those who used her for their gains.

The character of Madhavi develops from an innocent girl who is happy and free in her world in the safety of her father's ashrama to a selfless woman who sacrifices all she had. She sacrifices her dignity, body and even her three sons. After being through the hell of slavery like conditions she emerges as mature woman who understands people and is careful enough to trust them with closed eyes and so she puts Galav through an examination to see whether he is worthy of marrying her or not and he fails.

Madhavi is disillusioned by this fact but the truth is not strong enough to break her down and she herself denounces Galav and sets him free from any duty and obligation towards her.

Sahni in this play has chosen the characterisation very symbolically. There is only one major female character and she is exploited by those who are closest to her. Other female characters are only servants who appear only for small tasks. This represents the society as a whole. There are few women who are person of significance and even they are exploited. Many of them do not have a say in the decisions made in the family even though it may decide the very fate of that woman. Her mother being dead is kind of a hint to signify that motherhood is also dead in such situations where men make all the decision as Simone de Beauvoir has correctly said:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine.”

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