



EXAMINING THE GENDER DYNAMICS OF AARCHI, IN NAGRAJ MANJULE'S SAIRAT

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ABSTRACT

Nagraj Manjule is a fine poet, and gifted filmmaker and scriptwriter, with social sensitivity, and a strong connection to his roots. His latest film Sairat, meaning 'Wild' deals with the trials and tribulations faced by the young teenage lovers during the course of their journey from the heady, dreaminess of the world of love to the stark realities of life. Despite of primarily being a love story, Sairat interweaves different narratives, creating a rich texture of experiences. Sairat is breathtakingly fresh in its storytelling technique. The uniqueness of Sairat however lies in its bold approach towards the portrayal of female protagonist Aarchi. Present paper attempts to examine the gender dynamics of the protagonist aarchi, in Nagraj Manjule's film Sairat.

Introduction

Nagraj Manjule has published "Unhachya Kataviruddha", a collection of poems, which received critical acclaim, and won the renowned Damani Literary Award. His first short film, "Pistulya" won national and other awards. His second film, and first feature film "Fandry" won not only the prestigious 'Indira Gandhi Award for Best First Film of a Director', but went on to win many national and international awards. His third film, and second feature film "Sairat" created ripples by being the highest grossing Marathi film ever, with earnings of sixty crore at the box office.

Sairat is a typical love story of two teenagers, strewn with conflicts of class and caste. The hackneyed plot further conforms to clichés, as the young lovers elope following the violent objection to their love from the girl's family. The story ends on an expected note, and yet leaves an impression of deep unease. Nagraj Manjule succeeds in reimagining the classic love story by breathing freshness into the treatment of the plot and making everyday things seems surreal. The development of tender love, rendered in all its rustic simplicity, enlivens the slow unfolding of the story. Different narratives of caste system, the brutal hegemony of the upper caste, and the social dynamics of class difference are masterfully incorporated into the



centrality of the story. The exceptionality of Sairat however lies in the choice of the protagonist, and the gender and power dynamics portrayed through her.

Prashant Kale (Parshya) is a lower caste boy, who is academically brilliant, captain of the local cricket team, and a budding poet. He is head over heels in love with his classmate, Archana Patil (Aarchi), the daughter of an upper caste, rich and powerful local politician. Shy and uncertain of Aarchi's reaction to his feelings, Parshya keeps on following her and stealing glances at her. Aarchi is bold, hedonist girl, who does not mince words while expressing herself. She reciprocates Parshya's love. But when her father discovers their affair, he tries every trick in the book, using all his might, to separate them. The pair however becomes successful in eloping, with the help of Parshya's devoted friends, and Aarchi's cousin. Once safely away from their pursuers, they awaken to the hitherto unknown harsh realities of the world. For Aarchi, it means the loss of privileges that she had grown up with, and which she had taken for granted. Surrounded by uncertainty, and mired in doubt, they soon realize the difference between loving each other, and living together. Over the period of time, they mature, learn to cope and adapt with life, and settle down in matrimony with a child. The past however catches up with them, crashing down their world and destroying their bliss.

Simon de Beauvoir claims that, one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. According to Kate Millet, gender difference is constitutive in nature. It is a social, cultural, political and psychological construct, rather than biological one. Sairat reimagines womanness through the portrayal of Aarchi. Instead of the usual male protagonist, we have Aarchi, a female character, as the protagonist. She roams around on a Royal Enfield, is confident around men, expresses herself boldly, and saves her man when he is getting beaten up by her cousin. But her boldness springs from her ignorance of the gender inequality prevalent in the society, rather than a challenge to it. Aarchi is well aware of Parshya's interest in her, but she is neither coy nor too eager about it. She confronts him about his constant staring and tells him frankly, that she likes his attention. When he still does not get the message, she drives to his home in a tractor, and suggests meeting her alone on her farm. She thus inverts socially ascribed gender roles by taking leadership in the courtship. Sexuality is an important tool through which rules regarding the sociocultural construct of the gender are codified. Submissiveness of female is thus standardized as the measure of her womanness. Aarchi however is comfortable of her sexuality. Once certain of her feelings for Parshya, she stares at him in the classroom unabashedly, so much so that he becomes uncomfortable about her directness. Archie does not follow gender stereotypes. She does not take the conventional domestic role. When pointed out admirably by Parshya's mother that she drives tractor, like a man, she says as a matter of fact, that she does so, because she likes it. She feels irritated when her mother tells her that a girl should be more homely, and not so much free spirited. She rather does not understand the gender equations of the society. She therefore easily tells her brother that she has taken the bike to college, because she felt like doing it, and that she is



not claiming his bike, as she does not use it daily. She does not feel the need to take his permission for using the bike, because she does not consider him superior to her because of his gender. When Parshya asks her with good natured mocking, whether she does not know how to cook, she simply answers in the negative, without being defensive about it. She walks out, when Parshya gets down to cleaning the room in order to make it habitable. It is Archie who implores Parshya to stay near her while he pleads that he must go to help Suman Akka in cooking. Quite contrary to the picture, where the husband takes the steering wheel with wife sitting with kid, we see Aarchi driving the scooter, while Parshya holds their baby son as the pillion rider. Archie attends office work, while Parshya handles cooking, at the food stall. It is Aarchie who asks Parshya out to a movie of his favorite star, while he is busy making a dosa. Role reversals in all these instances come naturally to Aarchi, and are not forced out of her need to assert herself despite her gender. Conventionally, when the bridegroom to be and his family first arrive at the girl's house, to discuss the possible match of the two, the girl serves tea and refreshments to them. As a parody of this convention, Archie tells Parshya to serve tea to her family, when her brother arrives at their house, for the first time. This is a complete reversal of the traditional gender assigned roles. Aarchi is assertive, not aggressive or arrogant. She disapproves her brother slapping the teacher for taking objection to the use of the mobile phone in the classroom. She also reprimands Parshya and Salya, for referring to their friend Pradeep as langdya, referring to his disability, instead of using his proper name. When she realizes that her father has booked Parshya, and his friends under false charges of kidnapping and rape, she throws a fit, forcing the police officer in charge to release them. She is also not afraid to brandish a gun and shoot her father's henchman, when it comes to saving Parshya and his friends. Aarchi thus rises above all the gender discriminatory notions, in the conventional patriarchal system. The essentialist notion of womanhood gets problematized because the meaning of "woman" shifts constantly based on varied elements of socio-cultural, political, and economical and historical factors. Rejection of patriarchal construct of a woman as a passive, docile, and subordinate partner of a man is not analogous to the acceptance of the opposite. It is impossible to escape the structures, and yet get defined by them. In order to overcome the hegemony of binary opposition of gender, by assigning positivity of presence to man and thereby assigning negativity of absence to woman, it is essential to rise above the structures that uphold this dichotomy. Aarchi does not consciously attempt to be like a man, by rebelling against the socially accepted tenets of womanhood. Rather she does not follow any essentialist idea of womanhood. She happily dresses up, enjoys her femaleness, and motherhood. She neither tolerates, nor expects different treatment, owing to her gender. She thus successfully overcomes the gender discrimination.

Conclusion

Nagraj Manjule's Aarchi is a free spirited empowered woman, who is comfortable of her gender, and yet does not subscribe to the gender assigned roles in patriarchal construct. She creates a vision of a society where biology does not automatically ascribe to one's role in the



society. She blurs the line between the construct of a man and woman. By not being a rebel to assert her gender, she undermines the conventional gender structure. She redefines the meaning of “woman”, by escaping gender equations in the patriarchal system altogether. Aarchi thus comes across as person who is free of the patriarchal definitions of man and woman, and in the true sense is an empowered human being.

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