

HISTORY AND MYTH IN K. J. BABY'S *NADUGADHIKA*

Ms. Rose Mary K. R.

Literature and history are inseparable; written texts being products of social, cultural and political forces. They engage with the prevailing values and ideologies of their own times. The concept of ideological apparatus was introduced by Louis Althusser, the French Marxist theoretician. According to him, ideology is “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (295). A small group of people always try to dominate or control the majority of people through the “false representation of the world which they have imagined to enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations” (295). He thinks of ideology as the main instrument of domination. Ideology discusses individuals in terms of ideological subjects within capitalist societies. Ideology controls individuals through a careful action of interpellation, by which people are made to feel that they have agency which, in reality, is being denied to them. As Peter Barry opines, “Interpellation is Althusser’s term for the way the individual is encouraged to see himself or herself as an entity free and independent of social forces” (165). Althusser uses two terms which are the ways or methods by which the dominant community keeps control over the marginalized community. This is achieved by two institutions, which he terms “Repressive State Apparatus” and “Ideological State Apparatus.” While “Repressive State Apparatuses” represent the societal institutions, “Ideological State Apparatus” represents the institutions which are the repository of ideas in any society. The fundamental purpose of both these “Apparatuses” is to endorse and perpetuate the dominance of certain privileged classes in society. Marxist writers and critics try to liberate the story of the oppressed from being lost in history. K. J. Baby, the writer-activist, tries to do

this in his play, *Nadugadhika*. This paper attempts to find out how history is presented in the play, and how myths, legends and stories of historical figures act as ideological apparatuses, silencing the voice of the marginalized.

In the play *Nadugadhika*, K.J.Baby retraces the history of subjugation and exploitation of two tribes in Wayanad and reconstructs their history. The play focuses on two indigenous tribes, *Paniyas* and *Adiyas*. As the name suggests, *Paniyas* see themselves as the men of labour and *Adiyas* consider themselves as the lowest of the lot. The two important characters in the play are Tamburan, representative of the dominant world and Gadhikakaran who performs *gadhika*, a ritual of exorcising evil spirits. Gadhikakaran, in the play is the voice of the tribe. He reminds his people about the injustices of historiography. History has depicted them as useless traitors and unworthy of existence. He unravels two centuries of Kerala history from the view point of the First Nation's people. During the time of imperialism, the East India Company joined hands with feudal lords to reinstate new modes of discrimination and power. In a bid to exploit the nation, they tried to re-empower the feudal system. In the play, the British make their entry through an announcement. They have come in search of Pazhassi Raja, who has been branded a traitor of the esteemed British Company. They offer rewards for those who give information about Pazhassi and three men from the tribal community provide the same. In *The Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, the historian P .K. Gopalakrishnan writes, "Thus Baber made all necessary moves to trap Pazhassi in his hide out and to destroy him like a rat smoked out of its hole. He had won over many Paniyas with bribes to inform him of the enemy's move. On 30th November 1805, three Paniyas informed Baber of Pazhassi's hide out" (395). The men are presented as betrayers, but the playwright brings out the innocence of these men. He says they might have innocently obeyed the orders of their masters. So, he feels he has to recreate a history for them. In the play,

Tamburan orders his men: “And when you go into the forest don’t forget to look out for Pazhassi and his people. If you find them, come and report to me at once” (345). The writer thus fills certain gaps in history, and gives voice to the voiceless.

The period from 1940 to 1960 was the time of migration of Travancore Christians to Malabar. The members of the tribes are told horror stories about Travancore Christians, the flesh -eaters. The feudal lords give them the impression that the migrants are man-eaters. Tamburan says: “They are Christians, from Travancore. They devour even the sacred cow! Will such infidels hesitate to bite into human flesh? I tell you, beware. No dealings with those man eaters” (420-22). Tamburan does not want his people to join the migrants. He thinks that this will ultimately lead to the loss of power and control over them. The innocent natives believe all the stories given by their masters.

The indigenous peoples lived without any knowledge of the outside world. The period from 1940 to 1950 was a significant period in Indian history. Indians were politically active. The freedom movement pervaded all walks of life, but this fervour seems to have eluded the members of the tribes. They only knew the version given by their masters. They witnessed their masters changing their loyalty from one party to the other. In the play, Tamburan, changes his opinion from time to time. He asks “Who is this Gandhi to challenge the mighty British? ... Gandhi is nothing but anti - Christ” (455). The very next time he appears in khadi dress shouting, “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai” (540). He gives the example of Gandhi’s simplicity to deny them food and clothing. He says, “Do you know what our Mahatma Gandhi eats one day? A single plantain-just that. Then why cannot you be satisfied with the fruits and roots from forests?” (540). Gadhikakaran, who is positioned against the master, tries to create awareness amongst the members of the tribe. He says: “A few real patriots who could see

all as real children of God were labelled as traitors. And their words of love, fraternity and equality never reached us. And their ways of life, liberated beyond race, caste and class, never touched us. We knew no good news from outside” (485-88). Tamburan himself is confused about the changes happening in the political world. His strategy is to support the group or person who is in power. He gives the impression that he is also part of the power structure. He tells stories about historical figures, and the natives easily believe these stories. Thus, their innocence is made use of by the master to exploit them psychologically.

The rise of communism is another significant change in the history of Kerala. Tamburan threatens the natives: “Did you know that the communists have risen to power? They just kill of the old stock like you!”(700).The communist workers reached the tribal colonies, and they begin to hear matters spoken in Malayalam language in favour of them. This, of course, was a new experience for them, because till that time, Malayalam was the language of their masters, and therefore the language of abuse and power. Influence of the communist workers brings some changes in their outlook. They attend party meetings and begin thinking differently. The ideas propagated by the party workers help them dream a world without class and caste differences. They begin to question and demand their rights. They realize that they too have equal right to live. In the play, Tamburan tries to be part of the communist party and he appears with a red flag in his hand. The natives rightly understand the fickle-minded Tamburan, and take the flag away from him. The play ends with the demand of the people to change the bamboo vessel of measurement to standard litre. Thus, their resistance becomes another phase in history.

The playwright incorporates myths and legends of tribal people to interpret their life and traces the beginning and the course of their slavery. The play was first performed as a street play for the members of the tribe. In the

Preface, K. J. Baby explains the purpose behind writing this play: “It deals with the history of Wayanad since some two hundred years back. Here was a people who had completely forgotten their past. I wanted to provoke their memories – from vague legends repeated so unconcernedly at their rituals, through different stages of history, up to the dreary present” (Introduction 34). The playwright’s search for the beginning of their slavery brings him to the myths and legends which are repeated in their songs and rituals. The *Paniyas* and *Adiyas* were enslaved at two different stages in history. *Adiyas*, who lost their Maveli, were enslaved by their masters, and *Paniyas* were enslaved during their wanderings through woods to collect fruits and edible roots. The story of their great ancestors Uthappan and Uthamma, who went to Ippimalai in search of fruits and edible roots is a story/myth that gets transferred from one generation to the other. When Uthappan and Uthamma tried to escape, they were caught by the Ippimalai Tamburan using net and made slaves. They stand as a symbol of the native’s quest for freedom. Their days of hunger begin with this enslavement. They worked like animals to satisfy their hunger, and also to realize the dreams of their masters. The dramatist thus unravels the history behind the legend. The myth of Melorachen and Keeyoruthi also explains how the indigenous people became slaves of landlords. The legend of Mavelimanavatheyam says how people were spiritually enslaved. In the quarrel that ensued between Maveli and the lords, Maveli was defeated. The people didn’t obey the lords immediately. The lords sent Mali, the fierce mother goddess, to arouse fear among the people. They ran in fear. The people were grouped according to the manner they reacted to Mali. Those who questioned Mali became the masters, and those who cried in fear became the *Adiyas* and *Paniyas*. The story of Mali was imprinted on their minds. Therefore they never protest against their masters, because they live in fear of Mali’s wrath. These myths and legends uphold a glorious vision of their past, a life connected to nature devoid of exploitation. Through these myths and legends, the playwright tries to reclaim the past of tribal people, a time when

they enjoyed complete freedom, and uses these to exhort the people to free themselves from their bondage. After years of subjugation, the natives realize, “Those who stole us from our times enslaved us with their gods” (930).

The play analyses the different modes of exploitation employed by the landlords. Tamburan, the landlord in the play, represents the ruling class. He devises strategies to perpetuate the power structure and denies the natives all opportunities for freedom. The literal meaning of the word “Tamburan” is God. He presents himself as the agent of God. He says: “Guess who was in my bed last night? The Kavilamma herself!” (705). The workers then obey the orders of the Tamburan. They hope for better luck in the next world, the world of their ancestors. But the words of Tamburan dismiss even this hope. He says: “You are bound for Keeyuloka, the nether world. And it belongs to us. Here or there, obey us and you may get along. Kalakankoranan is the task master there” (314-15). The master manipulates the psychology of the people by threatening them with consequences even after death. The men think, “When we are dead, we reach Keeyuloka, the nether world. It is a replica of this world with the same lords, and same slaves. And we remain the slaves, immortal slaves” (362).

The workers are made complicit allies in their own exploitation. A ritual of Kambalam is conducted every year. On this day the tribals work the whole day without any break. They are offered extra wages and alcohol. This is a day of celebration for them. They dance and sing while doing their work. The work becomes a ritual. The worker becomes a free spirit and works like a maniac. This is another carefully designed plot of the masters to make the slaves work. The workers are thus interpellated and (in Althusser’s terms) they feel that they are freely doing the work, which in reality, has been imposed on them.

Lakshmanan is the educated character in the play. His education makes him disown his tribal past. Gadhikakaran warns others: “His school days are

over. It has been revealed to him that all his miseries arise from the existence of his tribe, his people. If he remains there, he is sure to absorb those renderings of history depicting his people as useless, as traitors, as unworthy of existence” (99-101). Formal education reiterates the stories of Kings and the adventures of the master, and therefore his own race seem out of place in history. The deliberate distortion of history does not arouse in them anger or protest. They accept what they are given. The same ideology gets repeated in the film they get to watch. They complacently accept the standards of the master and it is expressed in their voluntary imitations of the master’s heroes. They forget about their culture, traditions and value systems and even become reluctant to identify themselves as members of their tribe. The educational system and media act as ideological apparatuses to keep them inferior to the dominant class.

In the play, there is no mention of physical torture meted out to the workers. There is no apparent repressive apparatus in function. The masters need workers to maintain the social set up. According to the changes in history, they use different modes of exploitation. They use the figure of Mali, the fierce mother goddess; Kalakankoranan or Yama, the master of dead world; the British who use weapons and Travancore Christians, the man-eaters or “cannibals”(420) to keep the labourers under their control. Myths, legends, rituals, education system and stories of historical figures act as ideological apparatuses through which the natives are interpellated to a marginalised position and these account for the operation of control structures for the perpetuation of a social set up which concentrates power and wealth in the hands of few.

WORKS CITED

Baby, K. J. *Nadugadhika*. Trans. Shirley M Joseph. Bangalore: Visthar, 1993.

Print.

Montrose, Louis Adrian “Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History.” *English*

Literary Renaissance. London: Oxford, 1986. Print.

Brannigan, John “History, Power and Politics in the Literary Artifact: New Historicism.”

Introducing Literary Theories: A Guide and Glossary. Ed. Julian Wolfreys. New

Delhi: Atlantic, 2001. Print.

Morrison, Toni. “The Site of Memory.” *Inventing the Truth*. Ed. William Zinsser. New York:

Houghton, 1995. Print.

Gopalakrishnan, P .K. *The Social and Cultural History of Kerala*. Thiruvananthapuram:

Kerala State Bhasha Institute, 1974. Print.

Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*.

Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. USA : Blackwell Publishers, 1998. Print.

Marx, Karl “Wage, Labour and Capital 1849.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie

Rivkin and Michael Ryan. USA : Blackwell Publishers, 1998. Print.

Barry, Peter *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. UK:MU

Press, 1995. Print.

.....