



REWRITING HISTORY THROUGH DRAMA: A STUDY OF NAIKAR'S *A DREAMER OF FREEDOM*

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ABSTRACT



Article Info:

Article Received: 2/07/2014

Revised on: 18/07/2014

Accepted on: 26/07/2014

Basavaraj Naikar is a reputed bilingual writer whose works have received wide acclaim in India and abroad. For his overall contribution to literature he has received D. Litt., from the International University of California (USA). His talent is marked by a fusion of critical insight and creative passion. *A Dreamer of Freedom* is a product of this fusion. The subtitle of the play defines the category and theme of the book: It is a "historical play about 1857 Indian war of Independence". Moreover the inspiration behind writing this play is described by Professor Naikar in the 'Preface': The special reason for my writing this play happens to be the political connection of my own ancestors with Bhaskararao Bhave's rule in Naragund. My great grandfather Virabhadranayaka was one of the army officers of Naragund and a confidant of Babasaheb. He fought heroically in the war with the British and lay down his life for his master. As a young boy I was inspired by my parent's narration of the heroic feats of Babasaheb as well as of Virabhadranayaka. The theme of the play was kept alive in my mind for the past thirty years. I made a systematic study of the topic by reading the major recorded material in print and tried to reconstruct the history of the colonial encounter in a realistic manner without resorting to sentimentalism or glorification. Instead of relapsing into the simplistic prose narrative in the third person and traditional historiographic methods, Naikar has tried to blend fact and fiction by foregrounding the historical information in the generic configuration of production of a play.

KEYWORDS: *Generic, Inhumanely, Disarmament, sovereignty*

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Naikar's '*A Dreamer of Freedom*' can be approached as an innovative step in rewriting history. Adding human flavor to the unwritten stuff of emergent nationalism in the 19th century, the playwright has selected a befitting protagonist named Bhaskararao Bhave of Naragund, popularly known as Babasaheb. A patriot hero from Peshwa dynasty Dada Saheb is an inspiration to the other kings of princely states of India instilling in all a new awareness of liberation

against the colonizers. Around the action and dialogue of the major character Bhaskararao the plot of the play is woven.

The play has an epic dimension having nine acts and all acts containing multiple scenes. The scene one of Act One is dramatically very effective since the beginning is marked by ritual worship of Lord Venkateshwara with the stage sound of drums, gongs and *nagaswaram*, a wood instrument

producing mellifluous notes. The *Arati* ritual by the priest in the presence of the member of royal family heightens the seriousness and introduces to the audience the indigenous spirit maintained throughout the play.

Bhaskararao appears as a sixteen year old boy in the introducing scene and the whole play charts his growth to maturity against the backdrop of political struggle and individual hardship. Like a Bildungsroman the gradual growth of the protagonist is offered through the construction of fictive situations suffused with a consistent chronicity that makes the historical referents quite convincing. The legendary history of Naragund supplements the reconstruction of the past when Bhaskararao's father narrates the strange experience of his grandfather Ramaraya on an annual visit to Lord Venkateshwara of Tirupati. Ramaraya was helped by a shepherd named Venka in crossing the river Tungabhadra who was none other than Lord himself. The narrative turns into a dramatic demonstration. Lights go off and come on the stage to carry the story line back to a point in time past and again bringing the same to the realistic plane of historical sequence. The religious and ethical make-up of the king endears him to his subjects. The servants of the palace are worried about the absence of an heir to the kingdom. As Babasaheb Bhaskararao had no child, he had a plan to adopt a son.

The lack of children and the death of father seem to make the king pensive and he sends for the young lady dancer whose performance has impressed him. The king's romantic moments with the lady in the moonlit night constructs the personal aspects of the king's character. He even sings a song of love at the end of the first act in an emotionally intense state. The next act is coherently connected with the preceding scenes as the king talks with his stepmother, Yamunabayi and wife, Savitri regarding the future heir. Both the women lament the death of the king's first child after six months of birth. They consult the astrologer who warns the king about his personal and political problems.

The emphasis shifts from the problem of the royal family in broader perspective in the second act and the historically significant issues are foregrounded. When the circular sent by the

Collector of Dharwad is discussed, being translated by the interpreter two policies introduced by the British are bared open like the Disarmament Bill and the Doctrine of Lapse. Bhaskararao's minister Vishnupant analyses the motives behind the order that all the kings of South India were to surrender their arms and ammunition to the British authorities as part of the Disarmament Bill: Sarkar, do you see through the cleverness of the British people? They have introduced the Disarmament Bill as a precautionary measure against the possibility of rebellion by the native king (34).

Vishnupant explains the Doctrine of Lapse to the king in a clear manner:

I have heard that the present Governor General of India, Lord Dalhousie, has introduced the Doctrine of Lapse recently in our country. According to this law, all the kings of the Princely State who have no children of their own, cannot adopt anybody without the permission of the authorities of the company sarkar. In case the company sarkar refuses permission to the kings, they have to lose their kingdom. The company sarkar will annex them (36).

In pursuance of 'Doctrine of Lapse' the sovereignty of the states lapsed to the Paramount Power on the failure of natural heirs. Under the Governor Generalship of Lord Dalhousie many states were absorbed by the British Empire: "Satara was absorbed in 1848, Sambalpur in 1850, Udaipur in 1852, Nagpur in 1853, Jhansi in 1854". (Majumdar: 1956). Lord Dalhousie did not allow the adopted son Dundu Pant, known as Nana Sahib the pension after the death of the ex-Peshwa Baji Rao II. Nana Sahib Pashwa's rebellion and the opposition from other kings who were dispossessed of their thrones and property form the historical basis of the play *A Dreamer of Dreams*. The unprecedented resistance against the British policy of annexation and interference that has been undermined as a 'mutiny' by historians is now rewritten, as a war of independence. Naikar in this play has assumed the position of an artist/ historian who has tried to recover the truths concealed by the politics of representation and rhetoricity of grand narratives.

The protagonist of the play Bhaskararao arranges for a journey to meet the political agent Mr. Manson, who is newly appointed to look after the

sixty-three princely states. The conference venue is on the campus of the palace of the king of Kolhapur. Bhaskararao breaks the gate while entering as a gesture of self respect so as not to lower his head and get off from the horse back. The four gates in succession at entry were designed to instill a feeling in the kings that they are subservient. That is the reason why each inner gate was smaller than the outer. The intension was to make them approach the British representative gradually bowing down. Naikar through this instance has tried to reveal the ideologically imposed concealment of the actual operation of the imperialist system.

The sound of the horse's hooves heard from off stage, the going off of light, the cooing of cuckoo (Koel), the loud clap, the sound of the firing of cannon, the whinnying of horses, the sound of drums and gongs are manipulated by the playwright through the stage direction of arriving at the desired effect appropriate to the ambience and requirement of situations.

When Bhaskararao's permission for adopting a son is delayed he enquires about the reason from Manson, but the latter when provoked bluntly refuses him. Bhaskararao draws his sword and rushes towards Manson. Manson escapes and the scene end with lights going off and coming on in quick succession. The long dialogue of 'Dubhasi', the interpreter in the form of reading out a confidential letter (written in English) from Nanasaheb elaborates in brief the political situation. The stage direction says: "Reads the letter silently and then translates it into Kannada, there is total silence in the Durbar". But the dialogue is actually in English. Had the letter reader read in both Kannada and English the effect would have been better. But the letter informs the audience about the beginning of the struggle to re-establish the Hindu and Mohammadan kingdoms led by Nanasaheb Peshwa.

While Bhaskararao decides to fight against the British and declare war, dissenters like Krishnajipant and Banyabapu plan out their treacherous moves. They are tempted by Manson to be given half the kingdom of Naragund. At a party they get a taste of Western music. They experience the thrills of dancing with British girls and sipping special liquor. The temptation makes them support the British and

execute the strategy of mixing oil and millet in the gunpowder procured by Babasaheb so that the gunpowder would not explode.

In the midst of shouts and shrieks of soldiers, clank of the swords, crying and wailing heard from off stage the king Bhaskararao and his men are outdoors in the dark in search of Manson. In scene eleven of Act Four, Manson is killed. The action takes place on the stage. Instead of reporting the playwright chooses to demonstrate the event. When Manson is discovered by Marya and Raya and is dragged on the floor Manson presses the trigger of his gun and kills Raya. That instantly fills Marya with passion of vengeance. He lifts his sword and severs Manson's head. This moment can be taken as the climactic moment of the play. Bhaskararao had wanted Manson alive for he knew that the killing of Manson would not solve the problem. When the slogan of victory is heard off the stage he realizes:

"Now we have wounded the cobra of the Company Government. We don't know when it will bite us to death" (116).

The severed head of Manson is hung from the cross beam of a gate of Naragund city with its tongue lolling out of the mouth. This scene not only builds up a historically significant spectacle, but wishfully visualizes the ever deferred vengeance lurking in the minds of the colonized and the deprived Indians. Bhaskararao is worried at this murder and anticipates the future problems emerging from this instance of resurgence. Critics would take this antagonism as a flaw on the part of the protagonist leading to disastrous consequences. But since the hero did not intend to kill Manson he thinks the event to be providential:

I had intended to capture Manson alive, but the situation went out of our control. What to do? Let everything happen according to the will of Lord Venkateshwara (119).

Bhaskararao does not refer to the incident as guilt and steers clear of the issue as a divine justice. He strengthens his stand on ethical and spiritual ground. His father had taught him not to bow down to anybody and not to be afraid of anybody. He justifies his future course of action with commitment and vigor:

By nature I am a lover of freedom. I don't want to be under anybody's control. I am ready to lay down my life for this honor and freedom (119).

The two treacherous clerks feel guilty for having cheated their master Babasaheb Bhaskararao. But they want to seek relief oscillating between two extremes. On the one hand they think of the reward promised by Manson and on the other they rationalize by relating their deeds to the "Karma" earned from the previous birth. The denouement is not free from violent and tragic direction. Yet there is no pathetic submission to fate on the part of the hero of the play.

The secret meetings involving citizens, administrators and merchants, the elaborate arrangement of surveillance, storage of food grains, arms, horses and military cooperation promised by other patriotic kings prepare the audience to wait for what happens next; the war with the British. Naikar provides the exact date and location of the war. It was June 2, 1858, Tuesday, the setting being Naragund. Initially the face to face encounter starts. Messengers report about the progress of events. When the company soldiers start shooting from a distance Bhaskararao instructs the commander for counter attack by starting the cannon fire. But the cannons do not explode. The commander discovers the gunpowder adulterated. At this point like an epic hero Bhaskararao resolves to fight until his last breath. He escapes from palace through an underground tunnel asking his mother and wife to follow the path suitable for them.

While parting from each other the wife suggests to the king husband the Rajput style solution. But Bhaskararao rejects the idea. The human dimension of his character comes to fore at this extreme point:

We are not as hard hearted as the Rajputs my dear, it is possible that we may reunite in future. Don't forget that we are tender hearted Brahmins. We accomplish everything in life with our intelligence and discrimination. I cannot behave inhumanely like a Rajput king (142).

Naikar dramatizes another war at the symbolic level. It is a historical war between the Company and Babasaheb no doubt, but it refers to the war between good and evil, the ethical choice of men and women taken immediately before the extreme

moment, the terminal moment of coming face to face with death.

The Union Jack replaces the "Bhagava Zenda" on the palace of Naragund. Yamunabai and Savitri (Babasaheb's mother and wife respectively) commit suicide by jumping into the River Malaprabha as there was no alternative. Bhaskararao listens to the news, but in such a critical situation he stays calm – "Neither elated by pleasures not deflated by sorrows" – an ideal state prescribed in the *Bhagavad Gita*. He prefers to go alone in the guise of a Brahmin mendicant to Nepal to be reunited with his confidants and be in the company of Nanasahab. In spite of his firm faith in God, he is full of remorse and is shaken. He asks: O Lord of the universe! Why not kill me at one stroke rather than bake me in the fire of anxiety? (117)

The myth of return of happy days after exile and suffering as repeated in the lives of King Nala, Shri Rama and Dharmaraj ever eludes him. In the guise of a sanyasi he moves from place to place and is finally arrested by Frank Seutor, a British officer. In the trial scene, he boldly criticizes British policies of annexation, but is "sentenced to death by hanging from the crimes of rebellion against the Company Rule".

The last two Acts depict how Bhaskararao escapes from the prison by the sacrifice of a poor Brahmin Shankarabhatta. Claspings the feet of Bhaskararao, Shankarabhatta offers him a bag of food and asks him to escape from the prison cell in the night before the morning scheduled for hanging. They change into each other's guise. In Act Nine Bhaskararao finally reaches Nana Saheb. By that time the mutiny is over and much time has elapsed. Both the freedom fighters share the dream of freedom that is yet to come to the country. Near Vishwanath temple while staying as a sanyasi Babasaheb is offered shelter by a woman Kashibai who is from Naragund. By the dictates of fate Babasaheb is obliged to marry the woman's niece and get a son. For the people and the administration Babasaheb's death by being hanging is a matter of past. But Babasaheb survives to pass on the fire of freedom to the next generation. He has lost everything – family, people and kingdom. But he has gained an heir at last, his son - a natural heir for

whom there is nothing to inherit except the spirit of revolution.

The play is of epic dimension not because of its length only, but because of the subject matter. The heroic struggle for freedom otherwise reduced to the status of a local mutiny in historical narratives of the West has been recovered by Naikar in this play. Naikar has restored the truth claims of the historical substance of 1857 Indian war resisting the distortion and misrepresentations that pervade our perception of the past. New historicists acknowledge "the radical difference of the past and the impossibility of accessing it free from the critic's own historical moment." (Childs: 2006) Naikar as a critic and playwright has taken much care to distance him from the traditional conditioning and contemporary cultural compulsions in shaping an objective and plausible picture of the part. *A Dreamer of Freedom* is certainly an important contribution to Indian English Drama.

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