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Staging Indigeneity: A Study of Vayala Vasudevan Pillai's *Agni: The Fire*

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Abstract

In Kerala, right from primitive ages, men used to perform rites and rituals in fulfilment of their spiritual love and devotion. Rituals differ from race to race, community to community and religion to religion. It denotes the identity and race of men and are closely related to the traditions followed by them for ages. Such traditions could be found in one's faiths, attachments, conventions and devotions which are passed on to the next generation. In his play *Agni*, Vasudevan Pillai was giving shape to a new theatre concept by taking the simple conventions of the traditional folk theatre. Theatre has its roots steeped in folk culture. It has grown out of the religious spectacles, rituals and rites. In the composition and presentation of his plays, Vasudevan Pillai allowed himself to be influenced by the folk theatre. In his play *Agni*, he infuses folk plays and myths and also brings in images connected to the rustic life of Kerala. He presents life deeply rooted in the indigenous soil. This paper studies Vasudevan Pillai's inclusion and deployment of indigenous cultural elements into the identity of characters and plot.

Keywords: Indigeneity, Folk Play, Kerala, Rural Life, Native Culture

In Kerala, the indigenous theatre culture draws sustenance from ritual performing arts. We have a large variety of traditional art performances both ritualistic and secular. Some of these are classical and the rest folk. The folk arts are closer to the people. They have myths, legends and history, all combined into a holistic unit which reflects the tradition of the people. The play *Agni* published in 1982, was written in the style of folk plays. Unni, the principal character in *Agni* is thrown away from his home by his brothers for demanding that family property should be made common property. Unni is an idealist and in his view everybody has a share in the motherland. A few people cannot be allowed to take possession of it. He wishes to renounce everything for the good of society. Thus Unni is presented as a Gandhian. Gandhiji believed that the rich people could be impelled to part with their wealth to help the poor. In the words of Gandhiji:

Supposing I have come by a fair amount of wealth – either by way of legacy, or by means of trade and industry – I must know that all that wealth does not

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belong to me; what belongs to me is the right to an honourable livelihood, no better than that enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community. (Kelkar 4)

In his note to the play *Agni*, Kavalam Narayana Panicker, the veteran dramatist has observed that the “*Santi Mantra* from the *Isawasya Upanishad* had been quoted at the beginning and end of the play to remind us of the principle that we have no claim on our wealth” (158). The brothers think that they have won everything and so they are not ready to give their brother Unni, his due share in the family property. Unni is trying to teach his brothers, though in vain, the Upanishad principle that we must donate everything for the poor and needy.

To lead a luxurious life Unni’s brothers want to have control over everything and his brothers are determined to win it by any means disregarding even family ties. As his brothers do not want Unni to come back, he was not even informed about his mother’s death. But Unni who is a ferryman of river Ganga had a vision in his dream about his mother’s death and so comes home.

The mother had been a silent witness to the evil deeds of her elder children and had undergone intense mental agony before she died. But her elder sons have to forget their hatred and jealousy and live again like innocent children by obeying the words of their uncle, otherwise, the fire in their mother’s pyre would not be extinguished. So for the time being, the brothers and their childhood playmate, Devi, come together. But the elder brothers want to annihilate Unni by presenting the Promethean myth as a subtext. Thus they wish to have Devi under their control. But the innocent uncle, Unni and Devi fail to understand it.

The playwright has beautifully woven into the play the elements of the *Kakkarissi* folk drama. *Kakkarissi Natakamis* a folk art form, a satirical dance drama popular in the southern region of the state. The protagonist in most of the plays is known as Kakkalan, an itinerant tribe of fortune-tellers. Other characters include *Kakkathi*, *Velichappadu*, *Thampuraan* and *Vedan*. With dance steps and songs, they perform on stage. The play opens with a welcome song. Then enters Kakkalan. He dances to rhythmic beats. The question – answer session between the Thampuran and Kakkalan moves the play forward.

A corrupt landlord shackles Kakkalan in order to subdue Kakkalathi, and sentences Kakkalan to be stoned labeling him a thief, and Kakkalathi who likes Kannakicurses everyone for killing her Kakkalan and this subtext is adopted to narrate the story of elder brothers killing their younger brother. Thus Vasudevan Pillai uses the essentials of the *Kakkarissi* play to reveal the various levels of meaning. He links the western Prometheus myth (the centre of power collapses and man becomes free with Prometheus stealing the fire monopolized by the gods, and giving it to human beings) with the traditional *Kakkarissiplay* for creating something new and fresh.

Unni, the central character in the play *Agni* takes the modern form of Prometheus as a nomad. Though not fully adopting, the Greek myth is beautifully blended with our folk tradition. This is what Vasudevan Pillai says about the inclusion of the myth in *Agni*:

A myth is a link connecting the modern life and original source of the uprooted humanity. Myths are the archetypes of life in all its emotional and sublime manifestations. They are the liberal and simple portrayal of sublime philosophies formed through the millennia. Myth's influence covers a wide range of human emotions, relations with fellow human beings, intimacy with nature, love, sex, sacrifice and family ties. (146)

Prometheus is the symbol for the means of reviving strength in the weak. In the play this power is symbolized through Unni. The burning pyre of the mother becomes the symbol of power for the union of the divided sons. They unite only with the sacrifice of Unni. This sacrificial aspect becomes the soul of the play. Thereby the play becomes ritualistic in essence. The myth is recreated here to interpret the modern life.

It is evident from the dialogue between the nomad and the landlord that the latter is not at all anxious about the disappearance of the pearl on the hills which has been worshipped by the poor. He is concerned with the 'theft of the fire' which is the symbol of his power. The nomad had wanted to steal the fire to provide light to the people. In this is implied the theft of Unni's property by his brothers and Unni's wish to distribute his property among the people. But the nomad is accused of stealing the landlord's fire to become the king himself, and he is sentenced to be stoned to death. Like Prometheus chained on the rocks, Unni is crippled by the torture.

The nomad who plays the modern role of Prometheus faces the questioning of his brother Perumkalan, the feudal lord. When he realizes that all his falsehoods would be exposed, he sentences Unni to be stoned and thus tries to get rid of him. Everyone plays a part in the execution of Unni in a playful manner. When they realize that the play has turned serious and they have fallen into the trap of the brothers, Unni who is dear to the people succumbs to his death. Seeing this, Devi turns into the revengeful goddess of Bhadrakali and like Kannaki curses the brothers and turns them into stone statues. Thus the external structure of the *Kakkariissi* play imparts a rustic beauty to the play.

Vasudevan Pillai creatively explored the possibilities of the ethnic physical training systems like Kalarippayattu in his play. The jumps, leaps, different types of walks and weird physical juxtapositions of actors indicate the influence of this holistic martial art. The body in movement suggests images for the audience to link up and recreate innovative structures and meanings. Thus their steps, graceful and rhythmic gestures and postures has a meaning which can convey a feeling. Also, he believed that when the actor moves from one point to another in the acting area, he must be aware of the beauty that is conveyed to the audience through the actor's movement. All shades of feelings and moods like delight, disaster, defeat, doubt and excitement can find expressive means through bodily movements.

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As the play moves out of the proscenium, it demands a natural style of pure and free emotional expression. This may be what Artaud wanted to draw forth to the modern stage in terms of 'Theatre of Cruelty' where the actor is schooled to outstretch himself in all the means of expression modelled on the instinctive movement and expressions of man in rapport with nature. Artaud in his essay collection, *The Theatre and its Double*, made the difference in Asian and Western spatial concept:

Our theatre which has never had the idea of this metaphysics of gesture nor known how to make music serve such immediate such concrete dramatic ends, our purely verbal theatre, unaware of everything that makes theatre, of everything that exists in the air of the stage, which is measured and circumscribed by that air and has a density in space- movements, shapes, colours, vibrations, attitudes, screams- our theatre might, with respect to the immeasurable, which derives from the mind's capacity for receiving suggestion, be given lessons in spirituality from Asian Tradition. (56)

There are so many factors made visible and audible on the stage in the Asian theatre. They merge with each other and suggest so many possibilities of looking at life.

In *Agni*, he brings in the images related to the rural life of Kerala. The playwright has taken river Ganga, the symbol of purity, the ferryman who takes people safely to their destination, the mother, fire and the pyre as symbols of indigenous culture. The River Ganga which is the symbol of purity in Indian culture is a nourishing image in the play. Like Unni his uncle was also a ferryman, who awaits for water to fill up the dried up river. When they were all children living happily, the river was full of water and it was their uncle who safely took them in his boat to their destination. Today that river has got dried up like the lost warmth of their love and brotherhood. Its ferryman, the uncle, awaits for the flood waters of love to fill up that river.

Agni is full of traditional Indian beliefs. Hindu beliefs and practices differ broadly from one geographic region to another. According to Indian Hindu funeral rites, the most appropriate place for cremation is the south. The pit for cremation is made in a fertile place leaning towards the south. The mother in the play *Agni* also rests on the south of the Thulasi mound. The uncle sends Unni who has come sobbing to prostrate before his mother's pyre to the same place.

In Hinduism, fire is one of the five sacred substances of which all living beings are created and is thought to be an eternal witness necessary for sacred religious ceremonies. Fire connotes many things to many people and cultures. *Agni* is associated with various forms of fire including sacrificial fires, domestic fires and the fire of funeral pyre. Native and tribal race remain closely associated with the sacred fire. They carry out regular rituals to respect the blessed link with the universe that fire denotes, much like the ancients once did all over the world. Fire is recognized as a purifier and destroyer, and as the generative power of life, energy and change. It represents brilliance and knowledge, destruction and regeneration,

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spirituality and condemnation. Fire is considered holy in Hinduism and the practice of cremation of the dead is owing to their worship of Agni. It may be true, as Mackenzie maintains, “Agni is the messenger between Gods and men; he conducts the deities to the sacrifice and the souls of the cremated dead to paradise...” (xxxiii).

The character of ‘the uncle’ itself is a creation of the native culture. In Kerala all are related to each other and everyone was considered an extended member of the family. The sense of bond and togetherness is deep rooted in our culture, thereby giving everyone a sense of acquaintance and security. Relationships help to enhance trust and unity. From the very early days the people of Kerala have assigned uncle, the status of a protector. Though the matrilineal system has gone, the people have given a place to the mother’s brother in their families. The uncle in *Agni* is the protector of Devi, who has lost both her parents. Though the elder brothers are depraved and immoral, and they are ready to respect the advice of their uncle they pretend to be children. It proves his influence in the family. They sing and dance and play hide and seek, their favourite game of childhood days.

Unni wants to go back after paying homage to his mother in order to paddle through the waters of the Ganga, to feel its purity, to become a part of it and take the pilgrims to its shores. Since there is desire, ignorance, violence, sin, life and death only in the mortal world, he wants to leave the worldly life full of impurities and live with pleasant thoughts in the service of the people. For complete freedom we must be liberated from all these. The Ganga nourishes the earth by carrying the life-giving water. It will never get dried up and become cruel and brutal. It may be the reason why Unni chooses to be a ferryman in the river.

As Vasudevan Pillai says in the director’s note to *Agni*:

Agni is based on the experiences, alternating between myth and reality- of a young mind who loves his village and is, in turn, loved by the people, and who wants to weave new dreams into human relationships. This is my own story as well as yours. (149)

With *Agni*, Vasudevan Pillai was introducing a new stage language. He creatively incorporated a blend of indigenous elements into the play. The stage language was pure and bracing, giving a new interpretation to the actor’s body language. The play can be seen as a keen dramatic inquiry into how many different ways human living conditions and mental attitudes in the present life follow our inherited realities. For the audience *Agni* is really a fresh and novel experience. It is a play that is to be seen with the eyes and ears awake and alert.

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