



Debunking the caged identity: *Muthal Naidoo's Flight from the Mahabarath* as a Critique of the Epic Conformity

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Abstract

In her play *Flight from the Mahabarath* (1992), Muthal Naidoo takes out the women characters along with Arjun (in his queer identity as Brihannala) and Sikandi from the grand narrative of the epic space and sets them free on the performance/drama space to explore their identities beyond the traditionally imposed stereotypes. The feminist assertion of non-conformist identities has been carried out through metatheatrical experiments, ridiculing the grand narrative through intertextual referencing, problematizing the equation between perceived identity vis-à-vis identity unfastening (as evident in the unsustainability of Draupadi's love for Arjun when the latter's gender identity verges on liminality), and articulating positionality in the hierarchy of power. As a South African Indian woman playwright Naidoo underscores the voice of dissent against patriarchy and the apartheid regimentation of ethnic identities. In this play, almost playfully, the characters are free to explore their identities and to recognize the ways they were caged in the time of the epic. The paper attempts to read the play in order to explore the ways of freeing the self from the ascribed values of the epic time and the recognition of the self with respect to the different class positions as prevalent in society.

Keywords

epic time, identity, intertextuality, metatheatricality, non-conformity, gender

Muthal Naidoo, one of the most uncompromising woman playwrights in South Africa of Indian origin wrote a play *Flight from the Mahabarath* in 1992. Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990 and in 1994; South Africa got Nelson Mandela as their first native president by putting an end to the oppressive apartheid system. Standing on this time of historical change in the history of South Africa, Naidoo's play revisits the place of women with reference to the identity politics related in and out to the anti-apartheid struggle continuing for nearly half a century. Citing the women characters from *The Mahabharata* along with the queer persona of Sikandi and Brihannala, Naidoo analyses the internal limitations regarding identity positioning perpetrated by the hegemonic discourse of patriarchy. The play connects the spatiotemporal thread of the epic with that of the historical past and situates the issue of identity with the gender divide that continues to exist. To understand the relevance of the play under reference in the context of South African politics, it would be pertinent to revisit the political history of the apartheid government vis a vis the growth of South African Indian theatre in the second half of the 20th century.

Racism has been a major blemish in the history of South Africa since the time of colonization. In 1948, when the National Party led by Daniel F. Malan came into power, it officially formulated racial segregation in the name of apartheid (Afrikaans: 'apartness'). The implementation of this policy of 'separate development' since the 1960s following the Population Registration Act of 1950 divided the population broadly into white minority and nonwhite majority and sanctioned political and economic discrimination against the nonwhites. This exclusionary policy classified South Africans as either Bantu (the Black Africans), Coloured (those of mixed race), or white (including the Afrikaners). A fourth category – Asian (Indian or Pakistani) was added afterward. Following the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Land Acts of 1954-55, separate residential and business sections were set up in the urban areas for each ethnic group, and members of other races were barred from living, operating business, and owning land in them. This resulted in mass removal of thousands of coloureds, Blacks and Indians from areas classified for white occupation. More than 80 percent of South Africa's land went under the possession of white minority while the nonwhites faced severe exploitation and were further restricted by the 'pass' laws. The nonwhite majority were denied of proper education as the 1953 Bantu Education Act reduced standard education system for the Black people into a training programme meant for manual labour and menial jobs. The Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 prohibited interracial marriage or sex and thereby imposed social segregation among various ethnic groups. The Apartheid regime gagged any oppositional voice by passing The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) which empowered the government to detain anyone it thought might propagate communist ideas. The Indemnity Act (1951) gave license to the Police to torture or to kill in the name of official duties.

The Cold War then was in its early stages. U.S. President Harry Truman's foremost foreign policy goal was to limit Soviet expansion. Despite supporting a domestic civil rights agenda to further the rights of black people in the United States, the Truman Administration chose not to protest against the anti-communist South African government's system of Apartheid in an effort to maintain an ally against the Soviet Union in southern Africa. Inside South Africa, riots, boycotts, and protests by black South Africans against white rule had occurred since the inception of independent white rule in 1910. Opposition intensified when the Nationalist Party, assuming power in 1948, effectively blocked all legal and non-violent means of political protest by non-whites. The African National Congress (ANC) and its offshoot, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), both of which envisioned a vastly different form of government based on majority rule, were outlawed in 1960 and many of its leaders imprisoned. The most famous prisoner was a leader of the ANC, Nelson Mandela, who had become a symbol of the anti-Apartheid struggle. It was not until the 1980s, however, that this turmoil effectively cost the South African state significant losses in revenue, security, and international reputation. After the U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986, many large multinational companies withdrew from South Africa. By the late 1980s, the South African economy was struggling with the effects of the internal and external boycotts as well as the burden of its military commitment in occupying Namibia. When South Africa reached a multilateral agreement in 1988 to end its occupation of Namibia in return for a Cuban withdrawal from Angola, even the most ardent anti-communists in the United States lost their justification for support of the Apartheid regime.

The effects of the internal unrest and international condemnation led to dramatic changes beginning in 1989. South African Prime Minister P.W. Botha resigned after it became clear that he had lost the faith of the ruling National Party (NP) for his failure to bring order to the country. His successor, F.W. de Klerk, in a move that surprised observers, announced in his opening address to Parliament in February 1990 that he was lifting the ban on the ANC and other black liberation parties, allowing freedom of the press, and releasing political prisoners. The country waited in anticipation for the release of Nelson Mandela who walked out of prison after 27 years on February 11, 1990. The impact of Mandela's release reverberated throughout South Africa and the world. After speaking to throngs of supporters in Cape Town where he pledged to continue the struggle, but advocated peaceful change, Mandela took his message to the international media. He embarked on a world tour culminating in a visit to the United States where he spoke before a joint session of Congress. After Prime Minister de Klerk agreed to democratic elections for the country, the United States lifted sanctions and increased foreign aid, and many of the U.S. companies who disinvested in the 1980s returned with new investments

and joint ventures. In April 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected as South Africa's first black president.¹

During this long struggle against the apartheid system, resistance came up in the forms of demonstration, strike, sabotage and language riots. Cultural performances like theatre, music and recitation became potential pockets of opposition and resistance. Amidst the ethnic tension and diverse cultural articulation as a reaction to the apartheid racial classification, the positioning of identity increasingly became problematic against the autocratic effort of imposing fixity – both cultural and racial. Indian communities in South Africa, in spite of its contribution to the struggle against apartheid, constitute as one of the smallest ethnic groups and as a consequence Indians or South Asians are often seen from without to be a homogenous group ignoring its rich and diverse cultural existence. The differences between religions, languages, customs, class, and political affiliations exacerbate internal tensions within the Indian community. Initially most of the Indians used to speak in Tamil, Telugu and Hindi and, quite naturally, ritualistic plays in vernacular used to be performed in public places like the temple. But gradually, due to the influence of Western Education, spread of English language began to take place. As a result, both English plays and Indian plays in English translation/adaptation became popular. The first significant move towards writing and producing South African Indic plays was initiated in 1963 when Krishna Shah, an Indian theatre director and playwright, came to South Africa to conduct a six-week workshop at which he encouraged the development of original work reflecting the material condition of contemporary South Africa. At the workshop, which was held at the old St. Aidan's Hall, he gave crash courses in directing, acting, and playwriting. At the end of six weeks, Ronnie Govender had written *Beyond Cavalry*, Benny Bunsee had written a farce, and Benjy Persadh had written a social drama. These three plays made up a triple collection called *Trio against Trains* (because the participants had to bear with the noise of the passing trains as St. Aidan's Hall was right next to the railway line) which was the first formal Indian South African Theatre. Ronnie Govender became one of the prolific anti-apartheid playwrights who was followed by Kessie Govender, Kriben Pillay. During this period from 1960s to early 1980s most of the mainstream theatre houses didn't allow performances from the subjugated communities. As a result, small community halls in the Indian townships, Bantu townships or in the coloured townships became the usual venues of performances. Most of these theatres were starkly anti-apartheid and retaliated against the white supremacy and as result theatre, as a medium of resistance, drew its audience from various nonwhite ethnic groups and thus carried out the task of coordination among them. From the 1980s, main stream theatre houses gradually became accessible to all and in 1994, with Nelson Mandela apartheid came to an end and South Africa

¹ See "History of Women's Struggle in South Africa," *South African History Online*, 21 Mar. 2011, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-womens-struggle-south-africa>

expressed itself as a democratic nation of rainbow culture, although, the ills of racial prejudice continued to be felt in multiple forms.

Throughout the protest against the white supremacy in South Africa during the Apartheid era, the position of African Indian community, in spite of their struggle against Apartheid, suffered an exclusionary politics. South African Indian communities encountered marginalisation perpetuated by a constructed sense of not belonging to South Africa (and the African continent at large). This is primarily a result of the apartheid legacy where the South African Indian identity, as a part of a Diaspora community, was defined by an Indian ancestry. Afrindian² theatre, besides its reaction against the repressive governance and discriminatory politics of the apartheid regime, had to carry out the responsibility of asserting the South African Indian identity as a community which is primarily African and cannot be excluded from African Identity on account of their ancestral link with India. Ashwin Singh, a contemporary South African Indian playwright, borrows the term to define his position as a South African of Indian origin in his lecture titled “An Afrindian Artist’s Odyssey in Post Apartheid South Africa.” In this lecture Singh makes it clear that ‘Indian’ is an adjective, a secondary reference while ‘South African’ is the noun (26:35-26:52). Muthal Naidoo also claims the same when she declares:

As a South African, I have chosen one of many positions adopted by South Africans of Indian origin. Some clearly regard themselves as Indian and have kept strong ties with the mother country. Others have repudiated Indian customs and have adopted Western values and traditions, preserving only those superficial aspects, such as clothes and food, which have gained the approval of the dominant culture. I fall somewhere between these two extremes. I am proud of my origins, but what I try to express in my work is my South African heritage, a mixture of Western, African, and Indian influences, and I hope that my artistic creativity reflects the uniqueness of my background as well as the complexity of South African reality. (‘The Search for a Cultural Identity: A Personal View of South African ‘Indian’ Theatre’ 31)

The South African communities of Indian or South Asian origin cannot be marked with a homogenised identity following the discriminatory discourse reinforced by the apartheid. Naidoo points out the internal differences within the African Indian communities which are otherwise seen as a small community in South Africa:

...because it is such a tiny community, it is seen from without to be a homogenous group. Meanwhile, it is an extremely diverse group with different religions, languages, customs, class and political affiliations leading to all kinds of internal tensions. (‘The Search for a Cultural Identity: A Personal View of South African ‘Indian’ Theatre’ 29)

² The term Afrindian was coined by Pallavi Rastogi in her book *Afrindian Fictions* where she uses the term to mark the longing of the Indian community for inclusion within the South African identity.

Durban Academy of Theatre Arts (DATA) was formed following a six-week workshop with the South African Indian theatre enthusiasts conducted by Krishna Shah in 1963. DATA attempted to promote theatre in Durban with a view to address people irrespective of their race and class. Their activities came to an end when the Government banned the performance of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in the pretext of obscenity or 'moral lassitude' for its frank treatment of an unhappy marriage. The controversy surrounding this production brought attention to the fact that plays were being presented to multi-racial audiences and thereafter there was stricter enforcement of the segregation laws and DATA was adversely affected ("The Search for a Cultural Identity: A Personal View of South African "Indian" Theatre" 35). This attempt to reach out to the multi-racial audience through theatre testified to the tendency of breaking the tag of monolithic and stereotyped identification.

South African theatre reacting against the issues of race and class discrimination during the apartheid era was predominantly written and produced by the male playwrights. Both the apartheid government and its opposition ignored gender and gender-related issues. While men playwrights and theatre practitioners were successful in creating a voice for themselves through which the issues of race and class (as categories of oppression) received attention, they did so at the expense of the South African Indian woman. The presentation of South African Indian women in their plays reinforces gender stereotypes. This presentation is often justified within fixed notions of culture and cultural identity (K. Gavender 36). Ronnie Govender's play *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, for example, presents a patriarchal worldview where the all-male characters refer to South African Indian women as 'girls'. The status of South African Indian women within the context of the play is not equivalent to that of the South African Indian male, who is presented as a responsible adult. None of the women whom the male characters talk about are given any names³. Whilst the use of names generally gives recognition to more individual identities, women are referred to in terms of their relationship to the male characters of the play. About the clipping of individual identity in the context of gender divide bell hooks thinks that "male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe that (they) are valueless and obtain value only by relating or bonding with men" (43). Muthal Naidoo's play *Flight from the Mahabarath* can be read as a critique of patriarchal discourse which denies the individual voice of women in the societal structure and intends to categorise women into stereotypes. Naidoo, in the beginning of the play clearly specifies her feminist idea behind writing and staging this play when she says "This play attempts to look at the *Mahabarath* from a woman's point of view" (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 214). To eradicate gender stereotypes and any institutionalized cultural construct, she intends to bring in cultural heterogeneity:

³ Rabindranath Tagore in his play *Red Oleander* emphasized how the state machinery robbed the exploited class of their individual names by reducing their identity to a series of numbers.

In casting the play, the characters should represent the rainbow nation of South Africa and any tendency towards ethnic stereotyping should be scrupulously avoided. Performers should be chosen for their ability to interpret the roles. Traditions, customs, rituals should also come from the diversity of the South African cultural context. African, Western, Indian music, dances and traditions should inform the life of the play. For this reason, I have called the performers of religious rituals shamans, rather than priests, sangomas, inyangas, etc. (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 214)

Flight from the Mahabarath allows women to free themselves from the stereotypes they have been forced to portray in the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. The characters literally step out of the epic to share with the audience their desires for a more fulfilling life. The women characters of the epic have been taken out of the epic space and placed in a liberated space and this spatial shift causes a layered tension manifested in the ways they respond to the shift from epic conformity to modernity. In the 'Artistic Statement' of the play, Naidoo declares:

The Mahabarath was full of women characters with wonderful potential. I decided to take their lives and do something with them from a feminist point of view. Just take all the women out and let them explore who they are and what they want to be, rather than just producing heroes for the Mahabarath, because that was their function in the epic—simply to be the mothers of this great hero and that great hero. (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 212)

All the women characters – Draupadi, Radha, Ganga, Subadhra, Kunthi, Hidimba, Urvashi, and Uttarai – come to the stage and find this performance space as a liberated one where they can shrug off their erstwhile confinements and be themselves. While the women from the epic narrative come of age, they pull off sari and remove tresses and appear in 'non-restrictive forms of dress' while Gandhari reaches at their space blindfolded suggesting her inability to repudiate epic order. Once getting into the liberated space, the women characters retaliate against Gandhari's allegiance to conservatism:

RADHA: If it cannot accommodate my speaking, it needs to be destroyed.

DRAUPADI: If it demeans my sexuality, it needs to be destroyed.

GANGA, SABADHRA, KUNTHI: If we are simply vessels for producing warriors, then it needs to be destroyed.

HIDIMBA: If I am to be a scapegoat to be sacrificed so that clans can keep their unity without resolving their real internal conflicts, then it needs to be destroyed. (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 217)

Hidimba refers to the spatiotemporal recognition of the mythical order as unalterable: "We have no power to destroy the epic. It exists in another time and

space”. But the exploitation inherent in the mythical order reverberates with the ills of the present when Subhadra refuses to conform to the gender role imposed by patriarchy: “No. I couldn’t be myself there. I was either Krishna’s sister or Arjun’s second wife or Abhimanyu’s mother; but in myself I was nobody. I don’t ever want to go back”. One should note that imposed sexuality, violation of freedom of speech, gender stereotype, and the patriarchal cornering of women as the devil or the goddess – all these were as much manifest in the South African apartheid regime as were in the ancient time of the epic. Naidoo, by linking the mythical past with the reality of the present, conceives temporality as a conduit of social atavism.

The conjugal relationship between man and woman gets thwarted when Draupadi is made to face the transgender identity of Arjun as Brihannala. Arjun’s liminal state of gender problematises the sexual relation sanctioned by the conventional order and it also causes tension even in the modern space which seems to be a liberated one. Draupadi, otherwise free from the shackles of patriarchy, has serious problem of accepting Arjun when the latter’s sexuality verges on liminality. Draupadi, unwilling to accept Arjun in his transgender identity, wants his masculinity – as was defined in the epic – back and demeans the form of Brihannala as mere masquerade. But Brihannala disowns his heroic masculinity and asserts the transgender identity what Draupadi thinks a masquerade: “It is not a masquerade and you do not love me. You admitted just now that you are repelled by Brihannala. You love Arjun and I am not Arjun the great warrior” (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 254). Draupadi desperately maligns the queer orientation of Brihannala and unnecessarily suggests a sexual relationship between Brihannala and Sikhandi owing to their non-normative sexual orientation:

DRAUPADI: You are my husband. You should be ashamed to call yourself Brihannala. Brihannala is not a man.

BRIHANNALA: What is a man? Someone who proves himself by killing? Someone who beats women? Someone superior to women? Someone whose authority depends on a woman’s servitude? If a man is all that, then you are quite right; I am not a man.

DRAUPADI: (Kneeling before him and clasping him) Don’t do this. Don’t torture me. I love you.

BRIHANNALA: (Gently raising her) I’m sorry. I cannot be your husband.

DRAUPADI: (Furious) Oh, damn you. Stop pretending. It’s because you are involved with that, that... (Pointing to Sikhandi) pervert. (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 250)

Sikhandi also gets a chance to relate his femininity through performance. While her mother expects to join him a tournament of stick fight, he, as a child, performs his queer orientation:

Sikhandi picks up the skin he is supposed to wear, the shield and stick. He looks around and sees other clothes. He drops what he has picked

up and goes to examine the other clothes—women’s clothes. He begins to fondle and play with these and then begins to put them on. He puts on make-up, looks at himself in a mirror and laughs. He begins to prance around. (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 250)

Brihannala and Sikandi befriend in their childhood days, and since their childhood days they do not conform to codified sexuality. Little Brihannala finds Sikandi in women’s attire and stares at him for a long time and asks him not to change: “You look beautiful... You are so beautiful”, says Brihannala. Sikandi asks him to dance with him and soon “the dance clearly develops into an expression of love” (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 250-51). The space of theatre allows them to recount their story which the epic narrative did not sanction. Brihannala here disowns his masculinity incarnated in the mythical heroism of Arjun. When Ganga affirms that their new space has no place for war and the warriors and that is why it is not a space fit for the great heroes like Arjun, Brihannala immediately confirms: “That is why I have come to you. I am sick of war. I am a dancer, musician and story teller. I want to devote myself to these arts” (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 221). But Draupadi, the leading votary of this liberated space, was struggling to accept Brihannala by dissociating his identity with the epic heroism of Arjun. Ultimately the liberated space of the play makes Draupadi realize her relation with Brihannala through recognizing self-identity beyond the grand narrative of the epic; she finally dissociates Brihannala from the forced straitjacketing as Arjun:

DRAUPADI: You accused me earlier of loving a romantic ideal, Arjun, hero, protector, lover, destroyer in one. Master of my destiny. But is that what I really want? Or is that what I am expected to want? As long as I am in this confusion, I do not feel I have genuine love to offer. So, you see, I still have a long way to go.

BRIHANNALA: (Taking her hand) Draupadi, I do love you...you are my beloved sister, my friend, my mentor.

DRAUPADI: (Taking Sikandi’s hand and placing it over Brihannala’s) And I will learn to love you both as friends and brothers. I am happy that you found each other. (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 266-67)

This space of enunciation enables the marginalized characters from the epic to explore their true identities and their relationships beyond the conformist stereotypes. Through the exploration of relationships between Sikandi, Brihannala, and Draupadi, the play destabilizes the male/female binary of the epic narrative and makes room for a liberal queer space where love does not abide by the imperative of gender binary. The play makes intertextual reference to mainstream editions of *The Mahabharat* in order to squarely criticize the patriarchal muscle power over the women; Brihannala mocks at the persona of Bhishma by imitating his authoritarian voice which eulogises the male ego involved in the practice of *sayamvara*: “Of all the ways of choosing a bride, the sages have mentioned, the noblest is that in which a

maiden is acquired by force from amidst a valiant gathering such as this” (Changing to an explanatory tone and addressing the audience) (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 242). This is a direct quotation from R. K. Narayan’s book, *The Mahabharat*, London, 1978, page four.

By referring to the patriarchal attitude of power play from a mainstream text of the epic, the play, by contrast, makes the reader feel the need of shifting to an alternative space where egoistic hierarchy of power would have no place. This non-hierarchised space of performance not only facilitates women struggle against the grand narrative of the epic, but also unscrews the subtle constructs of class within the feminist movement; Radha declares, “We have only dealt with your stories, stories of the privileged classes. Let us tell the story of peasant women like me” (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 256). Radha divulges how she as a shaman and Hidimba as a witch had been cornered by the village society without any reason.

The metatheatrical structure of the play allows the marginalized characters – irrespective of their class and gender – from the epic of *The Mahabharat* to retell their untold story of nuanced misrepresentation. In no way, this performance space is always and already liberalized; it is, rather, conflict driven. Draupadi, the flag bearer of women’s liberty, struggles to explore her true identity with respect to the queerness of Brihannala so much so that she once again goes back to the space and time of the epic and on her return to the spatiotemporal location of the play she could realise her erstwhile limitation which she finally overcomes by recognizing the queer space as an escape from epic driven caged stereotypes: “I could see that we were all in our cages of customs and traditions”, she finds out (*Flight from the Mahabarath* 265). This awareness of caged identities within a grand narrative brings the exploitation by *misrecognition* of identities on the basis of class, creed and gender as taking place within the epic closer to the identity politics of the apartheid regime in and out. *Flight from the Mahabarath* is not an escape from the epic, but a layered articulation of the internal incongruities within the epic. This space of articulation that the play provides approximates modernity in the sense that it is, in its exploration of human identity and relationships, more a process than an end in itself, more fractured and conflict ridden than a consolidated linear move, more plural than monolithic, more ambiguous than definitive.

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