

## Rereading Myths as an Act of Resistance: A Critical Study of K.A. Gunasekaran's *Kanthan X Valli*.

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### Abstract

K.A. Gunasekaran, the first Dalit theatre practitioner in Tamil Nadu is also known for his creation of Odukkapattor Arangam or Theatre of the Oppressed. His theatre addresses the problems of all the disadvantaged sections of the society like Dalits, tribal people, transgenders and other backward classes. By speaking out for these groups, his plays register a strong protest against all the hegemonic forces which exploit human beings in the name of caste and gender. He often takes his themes from mythological and Puranic tales which he critically reinterprets them from contemporary point of view to establish the fact that those tales often serve the interest of the oppressive forces. My paper attempts to study how K.A. Gunasekaran has re-read and reinterpreted the puranic tale of the marriage of Kanthan with Valli in his play *Kanthan X Valli* to make it a powerful discourse on feminism, casteism and social critique.

**Keywords:** Casteism, Feminism, Dalit Theatre, Hegemony, Patriarchy

Tamil Dalit literature had its birth in the early 1990s when the political consciousness of Dalits were awakened by the birth centenary celebrations of Dr. Ambedkar. Around this time, Dalit writers in Tamil Nadu brought out a corpus of Dalit writings. Sivakami published her first novel, *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* in 1989. The first Dalit autobiography *Karukku* written by Bama appeared in 1992. It was followed by *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) which “celebrates Dalit women’s subversive strategies to overcome their oppression” (Mangalam 4). Many short story collections were also brought out by Dalit writers like Abimani, Edayavendan and Imayam. Amidst this efflorescence of Dalit writings in Tamil, K.A. Gunasekaran, a Tamil Theatre practitioner published his *Bali Adugal* or *The Scape Goats* in 1990, which set the stage for Dalit playwriting in Tamil. Through this phenomenal work, K.A. Gunasekaran establishes himself as a serious theatre practitioner to portray the sufferings of Dalit people and Dalit women at the hands of caste hierarchy and patriarchy. In

course of time, he encompasses all the disadvantaged groups like tribal people, transgenders and the backward communities within his theatrical fold and makes his theatre a true forum for all the oppressed people. In this way, his theatre is otherwise called the Theatre of the Oppressed. His theatre group Thannane has produced more than 15 plays which deal with diversified themes such as the empowerment of women in general and Dalit women in particular, liberation of Dalits, untouchability, exploitation of tribal communities, the pathetic plight of transgender and so on.

Dalit studies in Tamil are still at a very early stage and in an exploring phase. Its critical framework and aesthetic paradigms have not been articulated and established properly. However, in its almost three decades of existence, it attempts to offer a markedly different literary and radical expression from the mainstream literature in its treatment of themes and techniques K.A. Gunasekaran, through his plays attempts to find out or create certain characteristics which are unique in Dalit theatrical idiom. In his book, *Thalitiyum Arangiyalum Arasiyalum*, he lists out certain revolting features which uniquely define his Theatre of the Oppressed and presents an alternate theatrical ideology to the main stream theatrical sphere

The characteristics of Dalit theatre are 1) Verbal language and non-verbal language are used in equal and effective measure in Dalit theatrical art. 2) Excessive costumes and scenic and stage properties are avoided in Dalit theatre as it is a simple and inexpensive theatre. 3) It is performed on and off the stage and more emphasis is given to open air performances as it is easy to reach out illiterate people who don't have access to professional theatre 4) Symbols are used extensively and rigorous physical action and movements, representing Dalit's struggle and hard labour in day-to-day existence are employed to make it true to the subject matter it deals with. 5) It is important that the actors in Dalit theatre should not be mere performers. Since they are also victims of the caste system, they should act with a conviction and force which truly reflect their anger against the unjust system. Hence it is a revolt theatre. 6) Extensive use of Music, Musical elements like Parai (Kettle drum), Dance and songs are used which qualify it to be called a musical theatre. Also Dalit theatre will employ Dalit art forms like Mooli Parachi story, Raja Rani dance, Parai Aattam, Kuravan Kuarathi dance, Karagattam and Nayyandi Melam. 7) Mask performances are integral part of Dalit life and culture. Hence these components become prominent in Dalit theatre 8) Satire, sarcasm and double-meaning dialogues are found in different forms to

criticize and question the ideology and lifestyle of caste Hindus. They also serve to erase the false propaganda that Dalit ideologies and life style are uncultured and uncivilized. By doing so, they try to restore the dignity of Dalits and their culture .9) Dalit theatre employs different narrative techniques, regional dialects, different stage structures and properties which differentiate them from the main stream theatre. 10) The chorus and Jester are used to provide commentary on the incidents of the plays .They also lend contemporaneity to the subject matter by relating it to topical issues. 11) Dalit theatre deals with stories from mythical background which are re-read and analyzed from a critical perspective. This critical insight will challenge basic assumptions and notions which have been glorified across the ages. 12) Dalit plays will use conversational, simple and unpolished language to convey the lived experience of Dalits.

With all these characteristics, Dalit theatre will truly be an alternative theatre and a completely different theatre to represent all aspects of Dalit life and culture and will have no inhibition in acknowledging that it is for Dalit people. However, in extension, it will purport to deal with the problems and rights of women and other oppressed classes like transgenders and tribal people as all these people face social discrimination like Dalits. By broadening its scope, Dalit theatre is entitled to be called the Theatre of the Oppressed. Thus these conscious efforts and initiatives of Dalit theatre to break away from the mainstream theatre, “trounce (s) hegemonic ,traditional ,mainstream literary /aesthetic parameters and surge ahead to formulate a fresh ,alternative ,innovative ,radical literary idiom” (Mangalam 4)

As listed out, one of the ways in which Dalit Theatre registers its protest against the metanarratives and the hegemonic forces is subjecting the Puranic and mythical tales into serious critical interrogation to decode the ideology that is subservient to the interests of the oppressive forces. This is in tune with the contemporary Tamil Drama which advocates reinterpreting the mythical and epic tales in the light of contemporaneity. Commenting on this, K.A. Gunasekaran observes, “Reviving Mythical tales and re-reading them in view of contemporary relevance and making them into a dramatic text is emerging as one of the characteristic feature of today’s Contemporary Tamil Drama” (*Thalithiyum Arangiyalum Arasiyalum* 362). Apart from falling in line with the trend, this also becomes a necessity in Dalit writing and especially in Dalit theatre as these discourses often perpetrate caste and gender oppression in multiple levels in the Indian context.

Accordingly, K.A. Gunasekaran employs this critical strategy in his play *Kanthan X Valli* to find out how the original tale of Kanthan's marriage with Valli upholds the interests of male chauvinistic forces and casteism elements by internalising a particular ideology. The playwright attempts this critical feat by subverting the original tale with a different ending that speaks of powerful feminism. In the original tale, the playwright introduces a clown or a jester and sometimes a female clown to offer a critique of society and its ailments. His creation of jester performs the role of a chorus too by providing a commentary on the movement of the play. The use of language and sarcasm are skilfully handled by the playwright to delineate the casteist and sexist slant that language is embedded with and offer a material for black humour which smacks of tragic poignancy.

In the original mythical tale, Kanthan the Tamil God gets married to Valli although he has a wife by name Theivanai. This act of bigamy is glorified as a heroic tale of love rather than an act of ridicule and censure in the mythical context. There have been songs and epics written in glorification of it. Sankara Dass Swamigal wrote a play *Shri Valli Thirumanam* in 1892 which is a close adaptation of *Kanthapuranam*. Even a movie entitled *Shrivalli* was taken based on the play. After a century later, in 1994, as part of the revival of mythical and Puranic tales in search of linguistic and cultural identity, the tale is once again made into a dramatic text and enacted by K.A. Gunasekaran who closely followed his mentor Sankara Dass Swamigal in his treatment of theme and techniques with modern stage properties in the proscenium stage. However in 2004, when he re-read the text, he realized that it was a mistake on his part to have shown that Kanthan got married to Valli as it amounted to supporting an act of deceit and treachery. So, he decides to attempt a feminist reading of his text and cast a bold and assertive Valli who refuses to give in to the deceitful ways of Kanthan. Thus, the playwright with this modification and critical insight makes his play a powerful discourse on feminism in the later stage.

The story goes as follows: Valli is an adopted daughter of Nambi Rajan who is the king of a tribal land. Since she is discovered at a pit which is dug for Valli tuber, she is named Valli Kodi by her parents. She grows up happily in the palace and carries out the responsibilities assigned to her. Once her father asks her to take care of granary (Thinai Punam) as the insects and birds pose a serious threat to it. While she vigilantly watches it, the Narada sage comes there. Stunned by the glorious beauty of Valli, he immediately decides to get her married to Kanthan. He also proposes the offer to Valli who at once rebuffs

him. Realizing that he cannot convince her, he returns to the heaven and tells everything to Kanthan. He immediately shows interest in the proposal and sets out to meet Valli at once. In the disguise of a hunter, Kanthan approaches her and is met with dismal failure. Second time, he assumes the disguise of an old man and tries to tempt her with cunning and deceitful words of love. On finding out that Valli is not an ordinary woman who can be swayed by temptations, he contrives a plan to physically intimidate her. Using his magical prowess, he calls in an elephant which purportedly try to charge at Valli. Panic-struck Valli seeks protection from Kanthan on promise that she will marry him. When the elephant vanishes, she goes back on her words. Kanthan coerces Valli to promise again employing the same strategy. When she declines to marry him, Kanthan realizes that nothing can change her mind. So, he discloses his identity and appears before her as a young and handsome Lord Murugan with the hope of getting her consent. Much to his disappointment, Valli is enraged by this act as he has been feigning fake identity to woo her. She assaults him verbally and tries to punish him for his diabolical designs. Thus, the play ends with Murugan running for his life.

In this way, a feminist reading of the text by K.A. Gunasekaran offers immense possibilities to critically analyse and question the myth in a new light. This critical approach enables the playwright to replace an emotionally weak and fragile Valli with a strong and empowered woman in the new text. When Kanthan forces her to marry him, she says that it is her right to marry someone of her choice and she is not prepared to give up that right. Similarly, when Kanthan discloses his identity and appears before her as a handsome young god, she is not impressed by it unlike the Valli in the original text who agrees to marry him. This act of deceit has only angered her further and she becomes even more rebellious in her stand and embarks on punishing him. The words uttered by Valli in this context serve as a death knell to those who take women for granted and can get away unpunished for their offences against women.

Valli: Whether you are old or young, you are not the one who deserve my respect. You are full of falsehood, deception and cunningness. You are a hypocrite. I will not just like that leave you. Friends! We know about men and their psyche. Dont leave him! Catch him! Tie him up! Don't leave him! The lesson which we give to him now should be a lesson to all men. (*Kanthan X Valli* 96).

In addition, she is often critical of man and his institutions. Throughout the play, women are found to be very powerful who are quick enough to give repartee and retaliate against male chauvinistic ways. There is hardly any portrayal of a wailing woman in the play who resignedly complains against man's suppression. For instance, when Kanthan threatens Valli that he will seek justice from Panchayat for not keeping her promise to marry him, Valli retaliates saying,

Valli: Who is there in Village Panchayat? Only men like you are there. Are there any women like me who are taking part in panchayat? No. In that case, I can very well assume that whose side the judgment will be in favour of.  
(*Kanthan X Valli* 95)

The words of Valli are a critique of the male dominated panchayats where women have no representation and which are still a reality today. Thus, the playwright with his critical acumen and original re-interpretation of a mythical tale in the light of contemporaneity succeeds in transforming the religious text into brilliant feminist text.

Casteism, another major theme in the play is also effectively portrayed by the dramatist. Unlike the other plays of K.A. Gunasekaran which are tales of pain and exploitation on account of caste discrimination, *Kanthan X Valli* handles this issue delicately. Nonetheless they are strong enough to catch the attention of any discerning audience. The play is about the downtrodden, illiterate and ignorant tribal people who are segregated, discriminated and placed at the lowest position in the social hierarchy by the mainstream society on account of their lowly birth and abysmal conditions. Various dimensions of caste are critically analysed in the play. The jester's remarks regarding the origin of Valli is indicative of the significance of caste system in marriage. The jester comments that the story will have no complications as the child discovered near a valli tuber can be very well assumed that the child was not born in a tribal household. If it had been born to someone from Kuravan caste, the story would have had problems regarding inter-caste marriage as Kanthappan, who was born in a Devar community would not marry her in the future. This exposes the casteist nature of marriage system that is operative in Indian society:

In another place, assuming that Valli was born in a lowly and impure tribal community, Narada sage persuades her to elevate her caste position by getting married to Kanthan. Although she bluntly refuses the offer, it points out to a practice in Indian caste system where it is possible for a low caste woman to elevate her status by getting married to

someone from the upper class. The words of Uma Chakravarthi in this regard are worth quoting: “Many castes practice hypergamy where a lower caste woman is married to a higher caste man, enabling the woman’s caste to gradually move up in the hierarchy” (205)

The critical interrogation of a mythical tale by the playwright enables him to render an aura of contemporaneity and offer a sharp critique of the Indian society and its degenerative mechanisms. The introduction of a jester and Valli’s friend help him to attack the unfair practices of the present-day Indian set-up. It is to be noted here that there is no jester in the Sankara Das Swamigal’s dramatic version of the original tale and also in the earlier dramatic text penned by K.A. Gunasekaran. In the present text, the playwright deliberately creates a jester and Valli’s friend, the female counterpart of the jester to use them as his mouthpiece to voice out his protest against the social evils that plague the Indian society. Their indictment is often aimed at unscrupulous and corrupt holy men who cheat them by capitalizing on the vulnerability of the gullible. When Narada Sage shows excessive interest in fixing the marriage between Kanthan and Valli to the extent of forcing her, the jester remarks why a sage who has renounced all worldly pleasures should show a lot of interest in it and laments how these holy men from the beginning have a weakness for women. Valli’s friend too suspects the intention of Narada sage and comments that,

Valli’s friend: He looks like a fake godman. These countless godmen are the only group in India which live without doing any work and shedding any sweat drops. They make their livelihood by cheating people. Even some of them stay away from their oath to remain celibate. I guess this one (Narada sage) belongs to that group. (*Kanthan X Valli* 72)

In another stance, when Valli regrets over the promise that she had made to Kanthan about marrying him, the jester remarks that she need not bother about promising someone who is an embodiment of deceit and falsehood. In this connection, he draws parallel to the unscrupulous politicians of the contemporary society who shamelessly promise on everything to gain political mileage and do nothing about it. His words expose the corrupt nature of present-day politicians who employ grand rhetoric in their speeches to ruthlessly pursue their nefarious activities.

Jester: What if you have promised someone? I can make 100 promises within a minute. .. How many people promise on their mother, language and country? They just make promises. Who kept their words?...Valli, don’t worry about the

promise you made. Do they people who made agreements to share Cauvery water acted on their words? Only the hapless peasants die of hunger. Do they politicians ever regret for not being able to keep their words? No one does it. Then why should you? (94-95)

In this way, the succinct remarks of the jester and Valli's friend make this play a social satire. Their critical observations about the present -day society lend a contemporaneous value to the mythical story. Thus, the playwright succeeds in reinterpreting a mythical story to make it relevant to today's world.

Finally, the play *Kanthan X Valli* radically differs from its original tale in its treatment of themes after it has been re-read and re-interpreted from contemporary perspectives. The critical interrogation of the mythical tale converts a simple tale of marriage into a protest play against casteism, feminism and social maladies. This act of resistance through questioning the myths foregrounds K.A. Gunasekaran as a serious theatre practitioner with a social commitment in Tamil Nadu.

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