

Holding up a Mirror: Overtones of Realism in Vayala Vasudevan Pillai's *Varavelpu*: The Reception

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Abstract

Social realities are presented very realistically through the dialogues, events, emotions and characters in the play *Varavelpu*, which presents a family story. The theme of the play is taken from the background of everyday social life. Every aspect of the theatre was fashioned into apparent lifelikeness and the play is typically psychologically driven, where the focus is placed on the interior lives of characters and their motives. In *Varavelpu*, Vasudevan Pillai presents struggles of man against tyranny, treachery, injustice, exploitation and industrialization. His characters are ordinary people having human follies. Without exotic or chimerical alteration, he portrays the local social, economic and domestic issues as it actually existed. In the play, he depicts distinguishable identities representing the reality of mankind. He had a strong interest in the audience to whom his work is addressed, feeling it to be his responsibility to deal with it with complete veracity. This paper focusses the social realistic projections in Vayala Vasudevan Pillai's *Varavelpu*.

Keywords: realism, characters, emotions, language, social reality

Vasudevan Pillai was an eminent theatre personality who had enriched the Malayalam theatre of the 1970s and 1980s with his profound knowledge and practical wisdom. He has been actively involved in all aspects of Malayalam theatre from writing and direction to teaching, research and organizing workshops for the last four decades. He has given his contribution to introduce and relate the newer tendencies in the western theatre and also to relink theatre with Kerala's ancient traditions of ritual theatre and performance tradition. Inspired by G. Sankara Pillai, a leading theatre personality in Kerala, Vasudevan Pillai began a new journey with novel experiments and innovative applications of modern theatre techniques into Malayalam theatre. He offered dramatic solutions for the chaos and contradictions prevailing in the contemporary society. Most of Vasudevan Pillai's plays were a reaction against the plutocracy, evil practices and injustices prevailed in our society. This was very obvious in his play *Varavelpu*, which was published in 1985. It deals with the deception of a great leader Govindan Nair, by his own son, who is a typical contemporary politician.

Varavelpu opens in the living room of Sankarankutty. Vasudevan Pillai attempted to show life as realistically as possible. A photograph of the mother is seen hung on the wall. When the audience see it, they actually feel that they are looking into an actual and familiar environment. The action of the play is set in contemporary society. The play's settings were realistic in nature and the problems depicted were problems everyday people would have faced. Therefore, the playwright who wrote from a realist perspective, created true to life characters, settings, conflicts, and stagings. The representatives of realistic drama demanded of themselves that they should go into their own time and let themselves be marked by it. What is new in realistic drama is the subject of conflict that is taking place on the stage.

In his realistic plays, Vasudevan Pillai was relentless in his quest for exposing the negative sides of society, hypocrisy and dissimulation, manipulative behavior and he made untiring demands for truthfulness and freedom. Sankarankutty, the son of Govindan Nair, in the play *Varavelpu*, is the incarnation of selfishness and crookedness. He finds that his father, who had been a freedom fighter would pose a threat to his wayward life and hence the son kills his father. The younger son, Gopi, fed up with the family ties finds refuge in literary activities. In between is the daughter, Sreedevi who suffers everything but keeps her love for her childhood friend.

Most of the images we find in Vasudevan Pillai's plays are based on Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions. As we could see in his other plays, *Varavelpu* also places much importance on such images. He provokes the audience not only with words and actions, but also with symbols. In order to strengthen the reality effect, the symbols are culturally constructed. For Sreedevi, her mother's photograph is an emotional refuge. As she has to live under the dominance and oppression of her brothers, the indomitable spirit of the photograph gives her the right guidance. It gives her the much-needed mental strength to face varied challenges at every step in her life. The play begins and ends with the photograph of the mother on the wall.

When Sreedevi undergoes emotional conflicts, a look at the photograph gives her the power, the urge to live. It is as if that the photograph possesses a charm of its own to influence mind and emotions. This mother-daughter relationship itself is a peculiar feature of Indian society. In the Indian tradition mother is given a place equivalent to God. The earth is also their mother as Lord Rama says in *Ramayana*, *Janani janmabhoomischa swargadapi gareeyasi* (bk 6, ch.124, line 17). It means both mother and motherland are beautiful and greater than heaven. It is part of the Indian tradition to protect and respect mother and motherland, because both nourish, tolerate and sustain us. The mother in *Varavelpu* is a symbol of supreme sacrifice. She was a brave woman who sacrificed her life for the independence of the nation. She represents purity of ideals, mental courage, humanity and brotherhood. In *Varavelpu*, much of the action takes place inside the house indicating that a nation can improve only with the improvement at the

home. The disintegration of the home points to a fundamental conceptual flaw which destroys the nation.

Though the mother had been strong and courageous, her daughter, Sreedevi is very vulnerable. She has neither the strength nor the resolve to assert herself. She knows only to weep and keep mum at her brother's threats and harsh words. She is a frail woman who can only conceal the spark of idealism ignited by her father and mother, and just blame her fate.

When Sreedevi places a garland made of sacred *Thulasi* leaves on her mother's photograph, Vasudevan Pillai brings forth the native tradition. From very ancient times the *Thulasi* has been revered as a sacred plant. A courtyard with an earthen mound planted with *Thulasi* is an inseparable part of Malayali life. Usually a day begins with the women of the household sprinkling water on the plant, for *Thulasi* is the great purifier both of the body and of the mind. Thus, in the play *Thulasi* garland symbolizes purity in relationships. As Sreedevi turns after placing the *Thulasi* garland, it is the image of Thankappan that she sees, the image of her lover, the image she has been waiting for all through her life with purity and without blemish.

To Sreedevi's brother Gopi, even his mother's death is a subject for a poem. He prefers to swim with the tide. He either sides with the prevailing injustice, or writes about the poor and the destitute, and sells it. Even writers, who are thought to be the custodians of culture, have been bought by the dominant classes and made to take up the pen for their selfish ends. Gopi has his own justification for his indifference towards family bonds. "A poet must not have narrow sentiments and attachments. He sees only the man. There is no intimacy in it" (Pillai 194). This attitude might have been the result of having caught in between an elder brother who is greedy and selfish and a younger sister who lives in her own world in daily prayer and worship.

Another prominent character in *Varavelpu* is Raman. He is poor and penurious, and goes to Sankarankutty's house looking for justice in an age where there is not even a speck of morality and idealism to be seen. Raman's two children died of food poison from contaminated wheat gruel from the school. Here one could identify a close connection between the events of the play and the social and political situations prevailed then. Deterioration of values in society, corruption, soaring population, illiteracy, poverty, political rivalries and pathetic living conditions have led to disappointment and frustration in the mind of Raman. Having no other way to earn a living the poor are ready to do anything. Raman's family lives on the money the two daughters earn by selling their flesh. "The bigwigs took her away" (217), he says about his daughter. It clearly depicts two pictures of society, the real face of the corrupt dominant class and the forlorn face of those living at the lowest rung of society. Govindan Nair is portrayed as a true Gandhian, but his son a wicked politician wants to tear down the social order and made

Raman a slave. Vasudevan Pillai's philosophical inclinations were more or less akin to that of Gandhiji's philosophical and ethical ideals. Here Vasudevan pillai reminds the audience of Gandhiji's *Ram Rajya*. Gandhiji points out that:

There can be no Ramarajya in the present state of iniquitous inequalities in which a few roll in riches and the masses do not get even enough to eat ... my opposition to the socialists and others consist in attacking violence as a means of effecting any lasting reform.... Ramarajya of my dream ensures equal rights alike of prince and pauper. (Dayal 172, 237)

If the Rama in *Ramayana* is the symbol of morality and values, the Raman in *Varavelpu* is the symbol of the exploited class which has lost its self-esteem.

Vasudevan Pillai incorporates many sensory details of theatrical importance in the play – the sound of glasses placing on the table, the sound of glasses breaking, glasses clashing, the sound of honking cars and knock on the door. Thus he has given an artistic verisimilitude to the plot.

The playwright enlivens the play by visualizing the events psychologically, emotionally and artistically. The incidents and the people are presented in a language that resemble everyday external reality and human experience. The plainness and simplicity of the characters' dialogue may seem mundane, but it is actually very revealing of the characters. Within his dramatic vision the language of the stage constituted an important element. For him, language was both an expression of a person's identity and a means to creating realism on stage. In the play *Varavelpu*, the father who has been leading an idealistic life realizes that his son has turned a drunkard and misuses the power the son wields. As the father tries to mould people and culture with human values, his son, Sankarankutty does everything with a view to attain material benefits and his pride leads to a sense of possession. Sankarankutty's wrong assumptions and conflicting views delude him from truth. After independence, when opposing camps of conflicting interests took hold of the national arena, and a celebration of nepotism and selfishness divided the people and the nation, when the rulers indulged in power and money, Govindan Nair, the mouthpiece of morality was labelled as mad. Sreedevi, the daughter, knows that her father is not able to suffer anymore. She wonders if he is coming back from the mental asylum, where he has been forced to stay, to see the downfall of his family. She thinks that it is better for him to continue his forced life in the mental asylum. When she opens up her mind to her brother Sankarankutty, his reply brings out his real thoughts.

Sreedevi: I wish if father had not come back!

Sankarankutty: Good girl! You also feel like that? Our father should not come back, that he should not recover from his illness. (192)

Sankarankutty, thus very briefly and clearly exposes his mind in the everyday language. He is motivated by real life urges like greed and lust more than honour and service. Vasudevan Pillai, here exposes a society consisting of people who would not hesitate to disown even their parents and forget family ties out of sheer selfish interests. He projects the social environment in the nineteen seventies where human values and family ties had no place. People forget everything when it comes to money. They don't really care about feelings and relationships.

Vasudevan Pillai adhered to the principles of realism, in order to enhance the apprehension and sensitivity of the audience. He believed that a play's effect depended on the audience's feeling that they are sitting, hearing and watching something that is going on out there in real life. It is the credibility in the relationships and actions, and settings that make *Varavelpu* a realistic play.

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