



Fatherhood in the short stories of “Neipayasam” by Kamala Das and “Unpublished Manuscripts” by Ambai : A Comparative Study.

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with two different short stories by Kamala Das and Ambai which portray two different fathers who undergo the similar situation yet react and respond in two different ways. The father, Ramasami in the short story “Unpublished Manuscript” by Ambai becomes a paragon of fatherhood and the “Daddy” in the story “Neipayasam” by Kamala Das fails to be an epitome of fatherhood as he is afraid of shouldering the responsibility of his own children.

Key words: gender, fatherhood, patriarchy, masculinity

The patriarchal canon and their responsibility for the household chores have always been farfetched in the Indian scenario. The society prescribes these works to the women and children are the ultimate responsibility of the mother. This tradition of chaining these tasks to women had been in place since time immemorial and this had been considered as a common and an accepted phenomenon. The situation entirely takes a different turn of events if men are driven to this situation, where they are left with no choice of escaping the reality that compels them to take this task which is alien to them. When they are endowed with such lofty responsibilities of managing the household, different men react and respond in many different ways. This paper deals with two different short stories by Kamala Das and Ambai which portray two different fathers who undergo the similar situation yet react and respond in two different ways. The father, Ramasami in the short story “Unpublished Manuscript” by Ambai becomes a paragon of fatherhood and the “Daddy” in the story “Neipayasam” by Kamala Das fails to be an epitome of fatherhood as he is afraid of shouldering the responsibility of his own children.

The short stories “Neipayasam” and “Unpublished Manuscripts” revolve around the concept of “fatherhood” in different distinct ways. Fatherhood is not just being a biological father ; a sense of responsibility and commitment tag along with it. The selected short stories “Neipayasam” and “Unpublished Manuscripts” mirror two different fathers who have different approaches and notion to “fatherhood”. This paper focuses on the notion of fatherhood and stereotypes that operate at two distinct levels in both the stories.

Death of the mother is common in both the stories and the reaction and response to that fatal incident by the fathers make both the stories stand apart and contrast to each other. Ramasami in “Unpublished Manuscripts” takes up the role of both father and mother for his daughter. He is

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not afraid of shouldering the responsibility. Thirumagal, his adorable daughter never feels the absence of the mother in her life. Ramasami provides her with everything in her life; he neither stops her education nor curbs her freedom. Tirumagal is endowed with all happiness by her father. She never feels a vacuum in her life in the presence of her father. Ramasmi breaks the stereotype that only women should take care of the family. He willingly commits himself in the upbringing of his daughter. He is against the subjugation and marginalization of women. He strongly believes that men and women are equal and women deserve respect and freedom like men do.

“Go and read child. It’s the only time you’ll get to study.....My daughter has to study, nothing much to cooking. She’ll cook if she gets hungry.” he would argue. It is indeed a wonder to hear such wise words from a man who belongs to the early 20th century, when the general notion of Indian society was to look down upon women and educating a girl child was neither appreciated nor approved of by the society. By breaking the social conventions, Ramasami becomes an ideal father who we can look up to. Ramasami’s existence was based on the life of his daughter. Nowhere in the story could the readers find Ramasami grumbling to manage or balance the entire household and his official work. Ramasami maintained equilibrium between his personal life and his official work. He was not only a responsible father; he was also a dutiful husband who didn’t reject the wife’s desire and passion for education. He allowed her to study and pursue her ambition before her death.

A father becomes quintessential and supreme when he stands by his children even at the times of crisis and conflicts. Thirumagal married Muthukumaran despite the warnings and caution of her father. Her marriage turned out to be a disaster, yet Ramasami did not abandon or disown her rather he was over-protective of her. He stood by her providing her with all emotional and moral support. When Thirumagal was pregnant he took great care of her. He never burdened her by accusing her for her wrong choice. He made sure that his daughter did not suffer the sense of guilt through his words or actions.

“Why all this fuss?” Muthukumaran grumbled. “Appa is concerned about you too, Muthu..he writes poetry. Give him milk to drink, he says.” Ramasami was not a father only to Thirumagal, he was also concerned of his son in law. Though his daughter was tormented by Muthukumaran, Ramasami was not rude to him. Ramasami’s magnanimity makes him an ideal human being. His magnanimity and generosity knew no bounds. Gender role conflicts and discrimination were alien to Ramasami. Had he been biased or prejudiced he wouldn’t have allowed his daughter to pursue her ambition and he wouldn’t have stood by her in all her endeavors. He had been a guiding star throughout his life for his daughter. He had instilled confidence and hope into his daughter.

Ramasami had never failed from his duties and responsibilities. He was the source of hope, optimism and strength to his daughter. The stereotypes in “Unpublished Manuscript” are experienced only through Muthukumaran, the husband of Thirumagal. He dominated his wife, cared the least for her and he had no respect for her. “Call yourself a woman?” he frequently asks and insults her before his friends. He always wanted his wife to be under the control of him and listen to all his commands and orders. He is machismo personified in the story. Muthukumaran failed as a husband and a father. After Thirumagal left him, he did not have any access to his

daughter, Chentamarai nor did he try to reconcile with his family. Fatherhood operates at two different levels in the same story; Ramsami becomes an epitome of fatherhood, whereas Muthukumaran is not more than a biological father.

Tim Kearney in “A Vision of Fatherhood” claims that good fathers are indispensable for the growth of society. He also mentions that “We need to make the transition from patriarchy to paternity in order to discover this new model of fatherhood. Fatherhood has become identified with patriarchy, on many levels, and patriarchy, as we know is a bad word today, not just for feminists”(Tim Kearney 609). Paternity will awaken the feeling of tenderness and sensitivity in men which is of greater good to the family and society at large. The transition also requires a lot of commitment, sincerity and will power.

“Daddy” in the story “Neipayasam” by Kamala Das has a different characterization altogether. The mother dies of a sudden heart attack. He is enveloped with fear and uncertainties after her death. Unlike Ramsami he is not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of his family. The fear, anger, uncertainties are due to the fact that he is unaware of the likes, preferences, tastes of his children. All these days it was only the mother who took care of the children. The father restricted himself to work and salary. He had only been of financial support to the family. He had hardly spent time with his sons. It is true that he had visions for his children; he wanted his sons to become an engineer, doctor, and soldier, yet there are hardly any instances in the story where the father had a friendly conversation or an interaction with his children. He was not able to come to terms with the reality of death of his wife. Her death is a great blow to him as the future waits with a lot of demands and questions.

Iqbal Kaur’s “Protest against Sexual Colonialism: Kamala Das’s *My Story*” clearly tells us that Kamala Das was completely against gender role discrimination and the victimization of women. But in this story, the victim is the husband as he suffers a lot of mental conflicts and he becomes a weak figure as he is afraid of the future. The “Neipayasam” reflects the condition of a father who feels hopeless and clueless after the wife’s death. The insecurity is largely due to the fact that the marginalized household chores, duties and responsibilities are now taking a toll on him. The death of his wife had made him feel like a victim and life becomes threatening and the upbringing of children becomes a fearsome and gruesome ordeal.

“Yes, she had released herself from the bondage of her responsibility. He envied her freedom. Now he was saddled with the young children...” He is not willing to commit himself to the responsibilities and duties. He questions his own abilities and potential. He considered their upbringing as a burden over him. The role of being a mother and a father torments and frightens him as he had never been of good support to his wife in the upbringing of the children. The confidence, determination and will power that we encounter in “Unpublished Manuscripts” are completely absent and void in the father in “Neipayasam”. The story also tells its’ readers about he not being a dutiful husband. His wife had died of heart attack which tells us that his wife’s health was not well taken care of. He also hesitates to give his children the food cooked by his dead wife as he considered it unholy: “...she had lost interest in her own appearance. She laughed rarely.” The wife is also not happy in the marital relationship as love between the wife and the husband had started fading. The father was not too close to the family, he was a typical stereotypical father who limited himself to work and material benefits of the family. The essence

of family bonding is null and void .He assumed that it is utterly impossible for him to take care of the children all by himself.

“How could she have done this to him? How would he bathe the children? How would he cook their lunches and send them to school.....No it was not possible for him to bring them up alone.” His personality is defined by his stereotypical ideas and prejudices. The gender role discrimination and gender role conflict function at its extreme. Gender role conflict occurs when rigid, sexist, or limiting gender roles result in restriction, devaluation, or violation of self and/or others (O’Neil 1981b). The father does not give any ray of hope and faith to his children. He himself is lost among the fear of responsibilities and duties that are ahead of him. This indirectly implies that all these days he had taken no effort in helping his wife as he had belittled these responsibilities. But now these commitments and responsibilities are looming larger and as he does not have a hang of it, fear anger and depression engulfs him.

Children are not just the responsibility of the mother. A father should be a mother, friend, guiding star and a guardian angel to his children. Ramasami stands superior to the father in “Neipayasam” because he never fails from his responsibility of being a father. He removes himself from the patriarchal society and he is dependant only on his own abilities and potential. Fatherhood and motherhood are interrelated and interdependent; Ramasami reaches the pedestal by accepting the reality and by performing his responsibilities with utmost sincerity and dedication without complaining or blaming his fate. The story “Unpublished Manuscript” also deals with the aspects of male chauvinism and liberation that education brings forth to women which could be taken up for future study. Fatherhood is supposed to bring in joy and bliss not only to the father but to the family which in turn will do greater good to the society; a father who is unwilling to take up the responsibility miserably fails from being a true father.

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