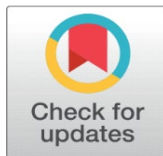
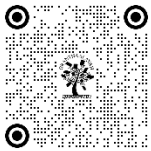


LABOUR ROOM: UNVEILING THE COMPLEXITIES OF MOTHERHOOD AND MARGINALIZATION IN WOMEN'S THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

K. V. Sreeja's *Labour Room* (2003) offers a poignant exploration of the complexities surrounding childbirth and motherhood, addressing themes of gender, class, and societal expectations. The play critiques romanticized myths of motherhood while spotlighting the physical, emotional, and social challenges women endure. Through representative characters, it highlights diverse experiences shaped by socio-economic and cultural factors, emphasizing the material realities of women's bodies. The play also critiques the patriarchal gaze, exploring trauma, resilience, and solidarity among women. By portraying childbirth as a deeply individual yet universally impactful experience, *Labour Room* challenges dominant narratives, fostering awareness and advocating for a supportive, egalitarian society.

Keywords: Women's Theatre-Patriarchy-Motherhood-Childbirth Gender-Cultural Norms-Trauma-Empowerment-Socio-Economic Factors Resistance-Feminist Activism Marginalization

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's theatre in Kerala has indeed played a significant role in challenging patriarchal norms and interrogating the conventional spaces and bodies that were previously dominated by masculine voices. Through their performances, feminist activists and performers have contested the prevailing representations of women's bodies and living spaces in culture, language, and society.

The interventions initiated by women's theatre in Kerala since the 1990s have been radical, consistently questioning the invisibility of womanist presence and challenging dominant narratives. These interventions have been both theoretical and sociopolitical, aimed at subverting the patriarchal hegemony that has traditionally defined spaces and bodies in Kerala modernity. One of the key strategies employed by women's theatre in Kerala has been to highlight the lived experiences of women and to foreground their perspectives. By doing so, they have exposed the ways in which women have been systematically marginalized and excluded from public discourse, and have challenged the patriarchal assumptions that underlie this exclusion. Moreover, women's theatre in Kerala has also explored the potential of theatre as a site of resistance and as a means of empowering women. By creating new narratives that challenge dominant discourses and by staging performances that question patriarchal norms, feminist activists and performers have opened up new spaces for women's voices and have provided a platform for them to express themselves.

K. V. Sreeja is a Malayalam playwright and theatre activist who was born on October 2, 1966, in Arangottukara, Thrissur District. She started her work in theatre during her campus days in the 1980s at Pattambi College, Palakkad, Kerala, where she collaborated with many luminaries and writers who were preoccupied with human rights and women's causes. Over the years, Sreeja has become one of the foremost exponents of community-based and issue-specific theatre activities, with a particular focus on rural theatre in Kerala. She has performed a series of important solo performances, including the recent *Kalamkai*, which explores the intersection of gender, caste, and class in contemporary India.

Sreeja's work in theatre has been widely acclaimed for its powerful critique of social injustice and its commitment to empowering marginalized communities. Her plays often focus on the experiences of women, Dalits, and other oppressed groups, and they use theatre as a means of mobilizing communities and raising awareness about social issues. One of Sreeja's most significant achievements in theatre was her participation in the Vaikhari theatre festival at Prithvi theatre in Mumbai in 2002, where her play was first presented. The director of the play was C. M. Narayanan, and its success helped to cement Sreeja's reputation as one of the most important voices in contemporary Malayalam theatre.

Today, Sreeja continues to be active in theatre, working tirelessly to promote social justice and equality through her writing and performances. Her contributions to theatre have had a profound impact on the cultural landscape of Kerala, and her work serves as an inspiration to many young theatre activists and artists in the region. Sreeja's play *Labour Room* is a powerful exploration of the experience of childbirth and motherhood, and the ways in which these experiences are shaped by social and cultural forces. The play uses the labour room as a metaphor for women's organic space, highlighting the intense trauma and socio-psychological concerns associated with maternity.

One of the key themes of the play is the problematization of the myths of motherhood, which are often romanticized and idealized in contemporary society. Through the portrayal of two women from different social classes, the play underscores the class determination that underlies the experience of childbirth and motherhood. This is an important political statement, as it highlights the ways in which women's bodies are shaped by material conditions and social hierarchies. The play also challenges the voyeuristic gaze that often dominates representations of women's bodies in culture. By focusing on the materiality of women's bodies and their experiences, the play unsettles the dominant narratives that seek to sanctify and legitimize womanist space in culture. Through this approach, the play invites the audience to re-think their assumptions about women's bodies and to recognize the complexity and diversity of women's experiences.

2. DISCUSSION

Labour Room sheds light on the struggles that women face in society, particularly when it comes to the experience of childbirth and motherhood. Through a vivid and intimate portrayal of the labour room, the play highlights the physical and mental trauma that women often encounter during this process. From the moment of conception until the birth of the child, women face a range of challenges and obstacles, including societal pressure to conform to patriarchal norms and expectations. The play underscores the ways in which these expectations can create additional stress and anxiety for women, adding to the already intense physical and emotional strain of labour and childbirth.

The words of the doctor and nursing assistant in the play serve as a powerful reminder of the trauma and pain associated with labour, and the ways in which healthcare professionals can contribute to or alleviate this suffering. By drawing attention to these experiences, the play invites audiences to reflect on the ways in which society and culture shape our understanding of childbirth and motherhood, and the ways in which we can work to create more supportive and empowering environments for women during this process:

Lie properly...don't stiffen muscles.... spread the legs and bend at knees...don't shake the legs...listen, use force..again...use maximum force. Now give me that blade...the baby is coming...don't faint now...it may suffocate the child. (552)

The above words clearly give us a chance to envision a typical labour room scenario. The use of representative characters in *Labour Room* highlights the diverse experiences of women during the process of childbirth and motherhood. By featuring women from different social backgrounds and with different emotional states, the play underscores the complexity and nuance of these experiences, and the ways in which they are shaped by a range of social, cultural, and economic factors.

The first woman's experience of delivering an infirm and weak baby girl is particularly poignant, as it highlights the ways in which women can be impacted by patriarchal norms and expectations around childbirth and childrearing. Despite the pain and trauma of this experience, she must also contend with societal pressures to produce a healthy male heir. This creates additional stress and anxiety, and underscores the ways in which women's bodies are often seen as mere vessels for reproducing the next generation of male heirs.

The second woman's experience reflects the more common narrative of a woman eagerly awaiting the birth of a child, but also reveals the ways in which patriarchal norms can impact even seemingly joyous events like childbirth. The pressure from her husband and relatives to produce a male heir adds an additional layer of stress to the experience, and highlights the ways in which women's reproductive choices are often subject to the whims of others.

The third woman's experience of unwanted pregnancy and attempted abortion brings attention to the societal and economic factors that can impact women's ability to control their own bodies and reproductive choices. Her experience highlights the ways in which women who lack social and economic support are particularly vulnerable to the trauma and challenges associated with childbirth and motherhood.

Overall, Sreeja's use of representative characters in *Labour Room* underscores the complex and multifaceted experiences of women during the process of childbirth and motherhood. By highlighting the diverse social, cultural, and economic factors that impact these experiences, the play invites us to reflect on the ways in which we can work to create a more supportive and empowering society for women during this process.

The first woman is so anxious to see the face of the child and her trauma is evident from her voice. She asks frequently: "Will it hurt?" "Where is my child?" (553). The second woman is a typical supporter of patriarchy who eagerly wants to forsake her own pleasures and comforts for the sake of others. She also has a glorified picture of motherhood inside her mind. She says:

My husband wishes for a girl; a baby girl like me. That is what he used to say. My parents desire a boy. I am contented with either of them...just want a normal child...my child

Like the humming wind

Like the ocean waves

Like the blazing sun

Like the cool moonlight

Like the multihued rainbow

Like the moon in the sky

My darling child, my nectar

You come and merge in me. (560)

The third woman is an outcaste in the society and unwanted pregnancy bothers her too much. She is not concerned about the baby and somehow wants to get rid of it. She is referred to as 'an unhygienic, cultureless creature' (555) by the nurse who assists her. She even tries to get out of the place. She says: "I have been trying to get rid of this nuisance from the beginning itself. And not to come to this place. Still, I wasn't able to? this pest stuck to me" (565).

On the contrary, the second woman is one who accepts her labour pain joyfully. She says: "Oh the pain comes like lightning in the groin...like the biting cold of hoarfrost...like the razor-sharp edge of a sword...even when it conquers me, I feel like loving it. A pain that liberates" (565). At a certain point in their conversation, the second woman holds the others' hand for emotional strength. At that moment we realize that the third woman is emotionally strong although she does not enjoy much privilege in society. She says: "How can we both live, without depending on and speaking to each other if we are alone in an alien planet" (567). Even the voice of the unborn child is heard from the womb:

Listen, the screams of my sky are until the sheath of your womb. The touch I feel is of the warm liquid in this womb. I lay curled up here. Still, my sky extends infinitely from the lifegiving breath, the blood, and from the energy you give. I am able to sense the smell, the colours and the touch. I realize that this is the most secure and blissful state of existence (568-569).

At the same time the doctor and nursing assistant reveal to the woman that her child is living with the help of artificial respiratory apparatus. She finally gives her consent to remove it.

3. CONCLUSION

In the final scene, a woman walks into the room, joyfully announcing that her son has welcomed a baby boy without any complications. Meanwhile, another woman, holding onto a third woman and a deceased child, reflects on the complexities of life. She points out the binaries that we all navigate - good and bad, sweet and bitter, the contrasts in complexion, and the inevitability of birth and death. As another woman enters, screaming in labour pain, the cycle continues. In a nearby room, yet another woman gives birth, while the two observing women silently contemplate the scene, clutching the deceased child. The words of one woman express the unique experiences of motherhood shaped by diverse circumstances, yet underscore the universal feelings shared by all mothers. Some can express these feelings openly, while others remain silenced by their circumstances.

This play diverges markedly from conventional portrayals by delving into the nuanced and often unacknowledged realities of pregnancy and childbirth. It underscores that the processes of conception and delivery are neither universally celebratory nor inherently idyllic. Instead, they are deeply individualistic experiences, shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and personal factors. By eschewing the glamorized and oversimplified narratives perpetuated by mainstream media, the play invites its audience to confront the multifaceted and often challenging dimensions of this profoundly human experience.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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