
Subversion and Sympathy: A Study of The Open Plain (Maidanam) as a Diasporic novel

"Woman too has a body; it needs exercise. She has a brain; it needs knowledge. She has a heart; it needs experience" (Musings)

I would like to look at The Open Plain (Maidanam) as a novel of diaspora, and to forge a more viable gender and caste politics of home so as to rethink the idea of belonging against the backdrop of postcolonial denationalisation. I would also like to examine the idea of diaspora in the present era. The novel provides excellent episodes to suggest that the whole idea of home has become so entangled in the politics of gender and caste that it has to be grasped in transnational terms. This is clearly shown in struggles between the characters placed deliberately and comfortably in the open plain on one side and the society cut away from them or even outcasted by them on the other side as narrated in the novel—struggles that bring home the fact that even diasporic belonging sometimes cannot be exempt from the impact of transnational gender or caste politics. LOVE, we believe, can bridge many a gap. Yet, the inter-community love affairs never go on smooth. The Koran states "You shall not marry Mushrik women unless they embrace the Faith. A believing slave woman is better than a Mushrik woman although she may please you" (Koran 2:221).

Interfaith marriage is one amongst the most fundamental sinful actions in Islam. Hinduism views marriage as sacramental however Islamic Nikaah (marriage) is a contract to obey Allah. Hinduism views marriage as sacramental however Islamic Nikaah is a contract to obey Allah. Hindu wedding is not a valid marriage in Islamic laws. A union of a man and a woman without a valid Nikaah is considered adultery punishable by death. In short, for a Hindu, conversion to Islam before Nikaah is a must. Chalam carved his three characters in a triangle – love relation – a married but eloped Brahmin lady, Rajeswari leaving her wealthy lawyer and foregoing her identity and respect and status and a well matured Muslim – adorer, Amir who broke the established traditional chains, eloped, settled in a The Open Plain (Maidanam) out casting the entire society literally opting not marriage, the security extended by it and even children as the byproducts of their love life, and another equally Muslim – adorer, young Meera in a state of infatuation who took all pains in safeguarding Rajeswari in the absence of Amir and in reuniting them. Three visible characters and some minor and one invisible minor character, her lawyer – husband make the listener- reader in the story (as the story is narrated by Rajeswari to a listener – reader) grasp the novel as a diasporic text.

When it came out in pre independence phase in 1927, Chalam's Maidanam immediately sparked heated debates among readers and critics around the issue of authenticity in its representation of the Hindu, especially Brahmin community of Andhra Pradesh. The novel has been a culture-oriented, more precisely, a Telugu diasporic culture-oriented novel. As a diasporic novel it represents the diasporic themes like displaced, dislocated and deterritorised feelings of a Brahmin and muslim community as well. This novel has made a mark in showcasing resistance articulating the feminine desire to be treated on par with men, and yet women in Andhra Pradesh have made modest progress in achieving certain rights in traditional home environments. While women in the Brahmin and Muslim community suffer from greater inequality, they now enjoy more economic opportunity, fewer barriers to education, and

expanded ability to participate in the political process than they did many years ago. Every day, we read tales of new conflicts and old grievances, of escalating tension and violence.

During such reading situations, we met generations of women and girls who have known nothing other than family and the offered ordinary life. Many were gripped by fear and anger; others had learned to dull their feelings with a quality of silence that often follows catastrophe. Having lost so much quality in life, women shared their experiences hoping some stability, some safety, some shelter, or even some food. They hoped that their voices would be heard and their triumphs celebrated; that we would showcase, through their lives, every reason that women must be considered full citizens and must have a stake in deciding their own future –and that finally, the world would listen. Chalam's *The Open Plain (Maidanam)* is such an attempt to raise issues over ideals framed for every woman before and after marriage.

In *Maidanam*, Chalam has subverted stereotypical ideals of motherhood, femininity, and masculinity while concomitantly maintaining his characters within the overarching stringent framework of a gendered society in nineteenth-century India. In one sense, the characters here did maintain their gendered identities and live within the prescribed social space initially and even after the major event of elopement and their settlement on an open plain, the reader never felt the traditional frame out of his boundary as Rajeswari made a swing between the two worlds allowing the reader to understand the gender gaps about which Chalam would try to bring a change and create a newer identity to a woman who indubitably confined to the domestic realm mostly. In normal wedlock of a Brahmin girl and her life in a reputed lawyer family after marriage would not allow even the writer to break the invisible strong bonds and to satiate her body urge.

A man of her own caste would be easily accessible to her so that she could satiate her cravings and be in her wedded status still. Then the novel could be just a love vs lust tale. The whole purpose of the writer to attempt a gender free environment would defeat then. Chalam respected the natural cravings of a woman, for, he recognised her as humanbeing first and then felt pity for the violence committed by the entire society against her. His strong warmth emotion to provide her the 'New woman' position pushed him to paint Rajeswari beautiful, bold, shrewd and ever ready to invite dangers for romance which she believes a human bond. However, even after her life in the *Maidanam* enjoying life to the lees, Rajeswari was chained with the strong notions of motherhood. She expected Amir to be extremely happy of the babe in her womb and did not digest the suggestion of aborting and rather saw him off from her life. Rajeswari was seen again a victim of feminine notions.

According to Butler the notion of "maternity" as the long-lost haven for females is a social construction. Butler invokes Foucault's arguments in *The History of Sexuality* to posit that in fact the notion that maternity precedes or defines women is itself a product of discourse. Rajeswari's hurt feeling was an extreme example of this reality. Chalam felt agitated to make female free from such notions. The notion of "sex" is always coded as female, according to Monique Wittig, a French feminist – writer, a way to designate the non-male through an absence. Women, thus reduced to "sex," cannot escape carrying sex as a burden. Chalam wrote about overcoming socially enforced gender roles and showed the female protagonist in *Maidanam*, a landmark in gender novels, in a heterosexual bond. While Chalam depicted only women in his texts, he accepted the idea that he was a feminist writer.

Every year, millions of women and girls worldwide suffer violence, be it domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation/cutting, dowry-related killing, trafficking, sexual violence in conflict-

related situations, or other manifestations of abuse. Violence against women takes many forms – physical, sexual, psychological and economic. These forms of violence are interrelated and affect women from before birth to old age. Some types of violence, such as trafficking, cross national boundaries. Violence against women and girls is not confined to a specific culture, region or country, or to particular groups of women within a society. The roots of violence against women lie in persistent discrimination against women and girls. Chalam's *The Open Plain (Maidanam)* is a romantic painting where the reader would watch Rajeswari like 'an Arabian horse' and nowhere in the entire novel was she subjected to any kind of violence against her. Her passive lawyer – husband did not come between her and her lovers, even for sake of revenge. He was still invisible even after the incident of his wife's elopement, he, being a lawyer who could drag both of them very easily to the court of law. Amir did not torture her after knowing her concern for Meera who asked to kill her rather Meera when he came to cut him into pieces knowing their sexual relation finding them in each one's arms after their love making. Instead, he stabbed himself to the utter dismay and disbelief of her.

Meera, so innocent and tender had no masculine inhibitions but just mad after her and neck deep in love with her, longing ever and ever for a real intimacy with her. He not only protected her in her tough times but also showered on her a kind of concern and care that would be desired by a woman. He visited even after Amir's arrival and she could not keep him away out of gratitude and with her motherly love towards him, and Meera kept on longing for some intimate moments to spend with her resulting into a catastrophe finally. She wanted to just rescue Meera but all that fell like a boulder on her head. Things go beyond her capacity when the police entered the scene and she took upon the crime on her to save Meera. A close analysis would reveal that Rajeswari was the victim of her own actions. Her first action i.e. her elopement with a Muslim may be an action free from any notions fell upon a woman by the surrounding gendered environment or a struggle to welcome a gender free environment.

But building the intimate relation with Meera - after Amir coming only – and involving into another physical love relation were the byproducts of her feminine notions. Here Chalam wanted to show the danger of being in the web of notions extended by the society untested and one may be susceptible to such notions even after experiencing what is desired. Chalam also wanted to show the society the real pains and longings of a woman which she needs to identify and grow by overcoming them which can be possible only when she unchains from the invisible chains and psychological notions she has been entertaining all these years.

Rajeswari's subversion against the societal gender wrongdoings and Chalam's sympathy to the female makes the novel an attempt to empower the feminine section in general. Subversion as a tool and Sympathy as a strategy are essentially worked on the Telugu translated novel *The Open Plain (Maidanam)* to place it as a Diasporic novel. That is the deeper story I want the world to know: that despite what Rajeswari experienced, she was able to rise to the challenge of building a contentment of one side can on no account be based on the frustration or humiliation of the other. Conflict can amend usual gender roles; women may gain more mobility, resources, and opportunities for leadership. But the additional responsibility comes without any diminution in the demands of their traditional roles. Thus, the momentary space in which women take on non-traditional roles and typically assume much greater responsibilities –within the household and public arenas–does not necessarily advance gender equality. Hence the challenge posed by Rajeswari was not to offer a role adjustment but for an entire role transformation.

Future study

Foregrounding voices that have been marginalised alongside canonical works, the present novel *The Open Plain (Maidanam)* engages with new directions in gender studies. A serious literary approach and application to the novel may lead to fresh light on key debates, including:

- The task of gender free nation-building in the modern period
- The practice of inclusion and exclusion in canon pattern
- The geopolitics of definitions of cultural identity
- The conceptual discourses on gender and nation
- The meaning of national identity in a global context

“Even for present day society, Chalam's writings cannot be considered superstitious or negligible. Nor does their significance cease with changes in the present day society. There are several progressive features in Chalam which may be relevant for future generations too. We should all understand Chalam's criticism of several important aspects of social life. All people should know these. His limitations and inadequacies should be rectified and improved.”

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