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## **Laying Bare the Colonial Values: an Analysis of Nagdo Betala's Nakedness in *Swapna Saraswata***

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**Abstract:** Clothing is a significant aspect in life through which an individual's status of living is measured. Within the values of colonial ideology, the fully clothed colonizer is viewed to be superior while the less or lack of clothing amongst the indigenous is regarded as a mark of their savagery, poverty, and hence, powerless condition. This paper looks at clothing or nakedness as a factor that determines the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. It analyses the role of Nagdo Betala, a naked character from the Kannada novel *Swapna Saraswata* (2009) and argues that he defies the colonial stereotypes about the indigenous people and through his bare body, he lays bare the colonial values.

**Keywords:** Nagdo Betala, *Swapna Saraswata*, colonial ideology, stereotypes, clothing, spirituality, laying bare.

This paper is an effort to analyze clothing, and less or lack of clothing which is mostly termed nakedness or nudity, as a factor that determines the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. For this, I seek to bring in the study of a character named Nagdo Betala from a historical fiction written in Kannada language called *Swapna Saraswata*. Although, originally a character from the Konkani folklore (Mascarenhas,1-2) he is pitched against the Portuguese colonizers and shown to be representing the GSBs (Gowda Saraswata Brahmin), the local community of Goa as the novel suggests. Nagdo Betala has many roles to perform in the story – from being a storyteller of the past to being a metaphor of community conscience. This paper concerns itself with how he wears nudity as a sign of his culture, lifestyle, and faith. By placing his character at the centre, especially focusing on his bare form, the present study seeks to argue that Nagdo Betala's nakedness is an act that defies the colonial stereotypes about indigenous people.

Clothing is seen as important aspect of living, especially in religion, culture and literature; it is symbolic as much as it is physical. In a conventional study of the Biblical Genesis story, the first parents'— Adam and Eve's state of not being clothed is supposed to stand for their state of innocence. However, it changes with their epic fall from grace; they try to cover themselves with fig leaves while being aware of their nakedness supposedly indicating knowledge and hence, experience. Clothing also marks a distinctive difference between animals and humans. Animals, in children's stories and cartoons, are shown wearing dresses and speaking human language as an extension of their humanization. Among humans, being clothed is significant in terms of culture and society, especially in terms of determining who has and who has not, in other words, who is rich and who is poor. Clothing or the lack of it, hence, becomes an index of power and class. In the colonial

scenario, it also suggests the difference between the privileged, powerful colonizers and the unprivileged, powerless and colonized.

The European colonizers, despite the differences in the country they represented or the land they brought under control, displayed a similar set of values while ensuring the maintenance of their colonial ideology. To begin with, they believed in the inherent superiority of their country, history, culture, religion and lifestyle as against the traditional values held dear by native inhabitants. The field of postcolonial studies has attempted to dismantle the stereotypical binaries created by the colonial ideology such as civilized/ savage, white/ non-white, powerful/ powerless which ensured the smooth working of the imperialist or the colonial rule. The English language and literature played an important part in indoctrinating the inherent supremacy of the colonizers' values which also included the inferiority of being a part of the indigenous. The effect of the colonizers' values on the colonized land and its people was long-term, and in some instances has lasted for many centuries.

Any book, whether fiction or otherwise, that deals with the subject of Colonialism or Post-colonial, examines the West's or White's perceptions about indigenous people in a negative light. While general assumption denigrates natives as pagan, backward, dirty and poor, there is one more aspect related to body on which the colonized are judged upon, that is the less or no covering of their bodies. In such a representation, the colonizer assumes the moral right to frame the natives as immoral and unrestrained. The 'superior' colonizer then views himself as civilized owing to him being clothed which corresponds to having higher status and power. Nicole Sault captures this unjust representation of binaries in the following lines:

These “savages” were important to Europeans only in relation to themselves. “Savages” had meaning insofar as they defined what being “European” was in relation to what being “European” was not. In this view of the world which separated body from mind, the “other” came to exemplify the “inferior” body in contrast to the “superior” mind of the European. So descriptions of

“savages” emphasized their nakedness. “Savages” had to be seen as naked bodies without thinking minds, just as Europeans had to be seen as clothed. (4-5)

Sault reads the western perception and representation of the savage and the European relation as opposing and dissimilar. The praxis of ‘othering’ is seen as a crucial aspect of such a relation as she echoes Edward Said’s lines from *Orientalism* (1978) regarding Orient and Occident especially when she speaks about how ‘Savage Other’ ironically defines the European self despite not being dissimilar. The othering continues in denigrating the indigenous culture and lifestyle which plays a significant role in the indigenous life and living. The lack of clothing amongst the natives is seen as a sign of poverty and hence, they are projected to be wanting even in the postcolonial period. An example of this is the picture of a third world scenario generally evoked in the media or literature, catering to the Western taste, to do with poverty and less or lack of clothing.

In a paper titled, “States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination” Philippa Levine looks at the politics and aesthetics of nakedness in the colonial era. Levine examines the meaning and significance of the timeless fascination of the colonial times with naked bodies and points out to the irony of the colonial perspectives regarding nakedness in the following lines:

While the sculptures and the statuarities of ancient Greece that celebrated the heroic, naked male body were, and often continue to be, read as the pinnacle of a civilized aesthetic, the unclothed African, Australian, Aboriginal, or Pacific Islander signified rather an absence of civilization. (189-190)

Levine traces the art-historical contrast between nudity and nakedness to suggest how “pictures of the native occupy a palpably different aesthetic, as well as political, space than those occupied by the nude” (192) in a colonial scenario. Speaking about the spiritual readings of nakedness she lists out three C’s of colonization – Christianity,

Civilization and Clothing and elaborates on how naked state of natives was considered to be a spiritual hazard by Christian missionaries and inevitably had to be associated with primitiveness and savagery. Levine discusses at length, with examples of letters and pictures, on the Victorian British era and its ambivalent attitude to the state of undress. While it makes an informative and interesting read about the double standards of the Victorian era with regard to nakedness and nudity, the present paper aims to look at colonization's associations of nakedness with savagery and primitiveness and how Nagdo Betala's character challenges such stereotype.

*Swapna Saraswata* (2009), a seminal work by Kannada novelist B Gopalakrishna Pai brings out the historical religious conflict between the Portuguese and the Konkani-speaking GSB community in Goa. The fictional history covers the story of nine generations of Pai family in Goa and the coastal regions of Karnataka and Kerala, where they migrated to. At the centre of the story is the character Nagdo Betala who holds the narrative of 344 pages together. He appears at the beginning of the novel and also at the close of the novel which is after a long time span of 400 years and hence, has a very magic realist existence. While his presence in the novel has been viewed as a significant symbol of community conscience, it is my endeavor to do an analysis of his presence in terms of the body using a postcolonial perspective.

Nagdo Betala's name itself suggests nudity; the Konkani word *nagdo* means naked or unclothed and *betala* means spirit. The novel also explains- "He did not wear any garment. That's why he was Nagdo Betala" (Pai 15, translation mine). Although his name indicates intangibility or an abstract idea, his body is also equally, if not more, important to understand his character and concomitant significance for the novel. He is the naked nomad saint who represents and upholds the Saraswata Brahmin culture, community and religion. His appearance presents the readers an avenue to understand and debate the colonial categories of civilized versus the uncivilized.

*Swapna Saraswata* offers a new perspective to the postcolonial studies about how being unclothed also has cultural implications. It points out, quite contradictorily, that not wearing clothes need not indicate savageness and poverty. While the novel does try to recreate the glorious history of the GSB community, using a naked character to stand for its spiritual essence shows him as a defiant character against the Portuguese. He is a role model to the colonized community as he tries to recover the land and its people from the effects of colonization.

Consider the following lines from the novel *Swapna Saraswata*:

Once when Nagdo Betala was walking on the street, Goyes came face to face... Goyes was dumbstruck when he saw the naked figure approaching ... He had never seen a person like that until then. When he saw him (Nagdo Betala) coming towards himself unafraid, he, afraid, put his hands on the gun...But ...Nagdo Betala continued...Both stared at each other into the eyes...(Nagdo Betala) passed by Goyes who stood stupefied... (Pai 126-127, translation mine)

The context described above is highly significant to understand what is infamously called the colonial conflict. To begin with, it brings up the simple but glaring contradictions between the 'clothed' colonizer and an 'unclothed' colonized. The conflict is played out by setting the persona of Goyes, a representative of the Portuguese colonizers, opposite to that of the figure of Nagdo Betala, who represents the Saraswata community and hence the indigenous natives. This simple difference extended in the novel to indicate a whole lot of binary oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized.

The paragraph quoted above is narrated from Goyes' point of view and it is interesting to study his emotions when he encounters Nagdo Betala. His feelings of being “dumbstruck”, “afraid” and “stupefied” suggest a feeling of being threatened by Nagdo Betala who is “unafraid.” This is a very unconventional portrayal of colonizer and colonized relationship as the representative of the colonized is not

cowed down by the presence of the colonizer. He does not submit to the colonizer who has the “gun” but meets eye to eye with the colonizer by staring back at him, indicating refusal to subordination.

In his challenging of the colonial values, Nagdo Betala can be compared with Caliban, the nearly-naked indigenous character in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1611). Caliban is regarded savage because of his fighting spirit. However Nagdo Betala is a Caliban with a difference because unlike Caliban who counters the colonizer with colonizer's own values related to language, Nagdo Betala defies the colonizer not by using colonizers strategy but by presenting himself as he is. Nagdo Betala poses a threat to the moral sense of the Portuguese. There is no imitation of the colonizers' values in any way but only an indication of laying them bare which he does by presenting his own bare body. His state of being naked is, as much as it is a physical bareness, a symbol and hence challenges the stereotypical colonial belief that 'lack' is less.

To discuss further on symbolism of nakedness at this point it seems important to refer to Partha Chatterjee's critique of Benedict Anderson's model of nationalism which throws light on the so called “inner core” characterized by language, culture and spirituality as against the outside “material core” that Anderson suggested in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991). In Chatterjee's words,

Anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the “outside”...the spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential marks of cultural identity... [This is] a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa.” (Chatterjee 217)



This is of significance for the present paper because of the spiritual notion associated with nakedness. Just like how the Christian missionaries considered nakedness of natives as spiritual hazard, nakedness in India is also closely associated with the colonized religion and spirituality. Readings on Nagdo Betala's character and origin point out influence religions native to India, Jainism and Hinduism. Maria Aurora Couto in her *Goa: A Daughter's Story* mentions the *Betal-Santer* cult and observes that while *Santer* stands for the fertility cult, represented as the mother earth, *Betal* is the male counterpart worshipped in his nude form which later was depicted as the icon of the *linga*, phallus of Lord Shiva, the male counterpart of the female Shakti (Couto 77). Here, Couto claims Betala to be a part of the local belief which later got assimilated into the larger Hindu culture. Another study proposes that the image of Betala, the nude saint, could be of the Jain Thirthankara named Parshwanath (Kekar 2013). The novel *Swapna Saraswata* also associates Nagdo Betala with the great Indian sage Parashurama reinforcing the relationship between nakedness and religion or spirituality. From Chatterjee's perspective Nagdo Betala stands for the "inner core" as he encompasses a whole lot of values pertaining to anti-colonial societies. In *Swapna Saraswata* his character stands for Konkani language, Saraswata culture and the Hindu dharma of the Gowda Saraswata Brahmins.

As a postcolonial text, *Swapna Saraswata* attempts to challenge the colonizer's perspectives about the colonized and, the central character Nagdo Betala has been bestowed with a role to lay the colonizers' intentions bare. Nagdo Betala's nakedness is a celebration of the indigenous self and community. His state of being unclothed doesn't reveal any 'lack' or renders him weak and powerless. It does not connote primitiveness or savagery of the colonized individual as colonizers would have liked to believe in. In fact, it is a defiant act. With his nudity, he puts the colonizer to shame; in other words he lays bare the colonial values and defies colonial stereotypes.

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