

READING SOCIETY, CULTURE AND HUMAN PSYCHE IN R. P. SINGH'S FLEA MARKET

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Abstract

R.P. Singh's The Flea Market and Other Plays is a collection of three plays musing on the ideologies and conventionalities of life and how it is interspersed with the workings of fate and destiny. Speaking with the author himself, the latter recollects how many of the instances are empirical branching from his own life experiences of his salad days. A Professor of English, at the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, he records a few minute and detailed references from English Literature, in form of references to ideologies and often poetry, many of which are the author's own compositions and at other times, a recollection of Andrew Marvel's 'To His Coy Mistress'.

Keywords: Drama, personal accounts, interviews, fate and destiny

“The Flea Market” is the first of the three plays, revolving around the visit of an Indian researcher to Paris and how he finds his mind and heart there. It opens up in a carnivalesque tone with masquerading identities, the most prominent being that of Corsea Antoinette. With a setting of the dice game that sets the mood quite right, it opens up perspectives of glamour and exuberance coupled with deceit and treachery. What marks the play unique from the rest of the writing is its set of binaries that marks a level of humanness in the world we live in. It's an everyday life scenario which juggles between joy and folly, reserve and glamour, extravagance and stinginess, all in one. On another note, it can read simply as a cautionary tale with latent meaning left for the reader to cull out. The text proclaims, “Yes, books tell you don't gamble” (Singh 16) but also goes on to record how unavoidable are these conventional taboos and the futility to buy into these. Set in Paris, it is a personal take on the cultural extravaganza of the city. In the end, the play takes a very sincere effort to draw a dichotomy between theory and practice and also ideology and passion when the female

protagonist claims, “I hate Feminism. The very ‘F’ letter scorches me. Yes, I am. it’s a treason of academics, they defame us. Is a feminist not a human?” (Singh26). Bishun Kumar in his essay entitled “The World Has Turned” A Flea Market”: Reading R.P. Singh’s “The Flea Market” in *The Flea Market and Other Plays* makes an interesting notification in this regard. He writes,

Her[Corsea’s] reaction against feminism discloses the widening gap between the man-woman relations and how politics in academics and ideological differences have dragged the central nucleus, the man-woman complacency to its binaries and polarities, if one stands at the North, the other stands at the South Pole. For having been failed to realize her biological desires and sensual cry of her heart, she hates Feminism and doubts every man a fraudulent (Kumar, 3)

The flea market of the play becomes an abstract representation of the world at large which is still modulated by disparities of wealth, gender and social status. A neo-colonial reading of the play exuberates how the tussle between the East and the West continues to prevail, its implications now more psychological. The play also posits the drawbacks of the academic circuits where only ideologies and theories prevail. What comes as a major drawback of these elite academic circles is a lack of practical application of these very value systems thereby distancing them from real life situations. Corsea is an exemplary example of this tussle. She oscillates between intense theorization of values and ideologies and its incompetency to translate in the real world. The gap is evident and the psychological frustration is visible in her thoughts, indecisive nature and lack of an identity. The play is characterized by multiple themes, the linchpin of them being the predilection of ideologies and principles over prepossessing emotions. This can be compounded from latter part of the text where Corsea explains to her companion, Ketan

I can’t love, I have to go by ideology. I can’t ditch my conscience, my bed-mate Elise. Ideology and emotions never move together. You are my emotion, you are my passion. I have to forsake you, Ketan, for my vision.... I am feeling torn, Ketan, I am torn.(Singh 47)

It posits the unending battle between human emotions and desires and the standard ideologies and principles one has to abide by. It also manifests the element of sacrifice which has to be made to meet such ideologies and principles. Another theme which can be interpreted from the vast literally extant of the play is the reaction of humans to an unwanted and unconceived outcome. This can be well explained from the Asian’s reaction after he lost consecutive rounds at gambling and scapegoated Martin for his loss. “Go away, rascal! Call yourself mighty? Mean hearted...” (Singh 23). It perfectly posits how an unwelcomed outcome is perceived by humans and the aggression it carries with itself towards anyone who may only play a vestigial role in the process of the loss, in this case, Martin. The text also provides fodder for its readers to contemplate on the emotional implications which a

harrowing past has on a person. Corsea, in the play, is continuously haunted by her past time and again which has made her emotionally distant and wrecked, incapable of trusting anyone, and has a strong anathema against men who subjugate women as mere objects. Past being a prologue, Corsea is triggered from every little remark or action of the Asian which results in her bursting out during any conversation. Her upsetting past has a controlling baggage on her present making her incapable of taking stable independent decisions. She has distinct emotional barriers making her too fearful to risk her emotional and ideological constraints. She says, “Now, you are making your way within me and I will never let this happen. Never! This is beyond my ideology.” (Singh 31)

The second play entitled “Expired” is a one-act play on a young couple and their conversations at a graveyard in Lucknow. The conversation is melancholic, nostalgic and yet full of hope marking an existential tone to the play. The setting is that of a road connecting Lucknow Cantonment and the Sadar Bazaar, with a backdrop of an Indian wedding, its quirks and jazz. A closer reading of the play depicts a comparison between the past and the present and how the past is always a haunting continuance on the present. What marks the play unique is its shocking end with a complete silence that leaves the readers to mull over the incidents of the play. Quite gothic in its setting and open-ended in its approach, the readers are left pondering over the succeeding events that might have taken shape later in the situation. The play also draws a similarity in its technique of drawing binaries used in “The Flea Market”. The lust of the minor characters, Mallika and Jay who act as elements of comic relief are contrasted against the platonic love of Alice and Hastings. The death of Alice and Hastings one after another in the year of 1857 in India serve as a prologue to the 1857 Mutiny, the first call of the then India against the colonial rule. Alice and Hastings hail from the British Empire and had travelled to India as it was with most military men in those times. The backdrop of a historical setting provides for a textured and nuanced reading of the play.

Long 152 years ago. The poor love-birds died. June 1856. Alice hailed from Ireland and from Belgium was he. Both met at Cambridge. Love sprang. The next spring – they sailed to India at the invitation of Justin, Alice’s friend, a Magistrate in British government. Justin hatched a conspiracy. Extinguished the life flame of the love-birds on the shivering sixth night of December. The official newsman told, “The flames of Mutiny are not extinguished still. (Singh 61-62)

One of the key features of the second play is the element of music that prevails throughout. It opens with the setting of a procession, its loud music and dancing, typical of the locale chosen. Latter, it is interfused with the hooting of the own and the sudden melancholic songs of Alice and Hastings. The fact that these two characters are not alive adds an ounce of gothic and eerie elements in the minds of the readers. The sad melancholic songs of these characters are set against the happy note of the procession. The play nears its end with sobs and silences that add to the subtle nuances of the text.

The final play entitled, “A Scientist E” can again be read as a cautionary tale very

much like “The Flea Market”. The two men are seen sitting sharing their solitary experiences and form a bond over many of the common tumultuous turns of life. The setting is that of the Worli Sea Face in Bombay and the musings of the two-old people over the sins of drinking. Quite Biblical in its approach, it records the experiences of the two old men and their hefty losses that came at the cost of a bottle. The play “Scientist E” revolves around a man who encounter two starkly different strangers. On the first instance, he met a man drenched in alcohol who soon passed out. On the second instance, he came across a stranger Ismail who had fallen victim to obsessive alcoholism that had cost him his career. To add to the bargain, Ismail and the protagonist started bonding over how alcoholism had destroyed their respective careers. While the protagonist was a brilliant professor of his time, Ismail was a top-notch researcher. Both of them gave accounts of their sour experiences with alcohol obsession, “They gave me wine... I got into it... They snatched my career... I came to street with an empty bottle... Wine was in, wit was out...” (Singh 70) recalls the teary-eyed protagonist after Ismail narrated his sad story. The main theme of the play is the aftermath of alcohol addiction that haunts its victims and the capability it has to destroy one’s career. The play reminds the readers of the miracle and morality plays of the Middle Ages with its didactic themes. The character of Darshan Singh, termed as ‘Man’ at the beginning of the play reminds the readers of the character of Everyman and strict categorization of virtues and vices of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. The dramatist, by the end of the play is clear of his stances and so are the readers.

The expertise of the author lies in his building quirky plotlines with a limited set of characters making each character an integral part of the setting. The title of each play speaks much of what the contents unfolds. The collection, written in very lucid language makes for a very easy and a quick read and yet the constant literary references keep the interest of the readers intact till the last page.

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