

CONFLICT OF EXPEDIENCY AND NATIONAL TRAUMA IN NEIL LABUTE'S *THE MERCY SEAT*

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Abstract

The Mercy Seat, published in 2002 is one of the first and most major theatrical responses to the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. The central concern in much of what Neil LaBute writes is the unpleasant side of humanity in which people often become mischievous to the extent of taking undue advantage of others or subjecting them to difficult situations knowing full well that they are in the wrong. The core conflict at work in The Mercy Seat is the deeply layered clash between the national trauma generated by an attack of the magnitude of 9/11 and the opportunism that two people engaged in an extramarital affair display even at a time of selfless concern and devotion towards the community. This paper attempts to analyze if it is possible to be truly opportunistic at a time of universal selflessness.

Keywords: World Trade Centre, humanity, Trauma, 9/11 etc.

Neil LaBute received international acclaim with the publication of his black comedy, *In the Company of Men*, back in 1997, which is a truly multidimensional work that has been viewed with myriads of angles. But, the theme that most concerns us, keeping the present play as the subject of discussion in the mind, is the theme of deception, even, at times, of the self, and opportunism. *The Mercy Seat*, published in 2002 is one of the first and most major theatrical responses to the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. The central concern in much of what Neil LaBute writes is the unpleasant side of humanity in which people often become mischievous to the extent of taking undue advantage of others or subjecting them to difficult situations knowing full well that they are in the wrong. 9/11 attacks were almost immediately recognized as a national trauma that was supposed to leave indelible imprints on the country's psyche for decades to come, but to explore the unethical side of humanity even in such readily evident times of a national tragedy, could only be termed an aberrant idea. To show a man and woman who have just miraculously been bestowed with a second life, as it were, not just entangled in the mesh of an illicit relationship but even exploring future possibilities at the expense of a clueless and anxious family is the kind of job that only a writer like Neil LaBute could have done.

The core conflict at work in *The Mercy Seat* is the deeply layered clash between the national trauma generated by an attack of the magnitude of 9/11 and the opportunism that two people engaged in an extramarital affair display even at a time of selfless concern and devotion towards the community. What is more perturbing is that this opportunism is directed against people of a man's own family, a wife who is worried dead about the safety of a husband who

could do no better than view this tragic happening as a kind of escape from his unhappy married life, and children who have no idea that their father could be so detached from bonds of paternal love even when this was the time they most needed his undisputed presence among them to make them feel secure. Ben Brantley's observation that LaBute's plays make a steady attack on "the moral flabbiness, selfishness and all-round nastiness of the male species, whether at work, at home or at play," holds quite relevant in the case of the male protagonist of the play. Brantley states that this has been a crucial strategy with LaBute that he shows his male characters to be boyish and moronic:

In his latest offering, "The Mercy Seat," Mr. LaBute has placed his eternal adolescent at the center of a cataclysm: downtown Manhattan, to be exact, in the phantom shadow of the fallen World Trade Center on Sept. 12, 2001. It should surprise no one that tragedy does not, in this case, ennoble. (Brantley)

The interesting thing to observe in the play is that it does not seem to struggle to justify the discussion that the two characters engage into, given the external environment of utter chaos and confusion. The scenario seems to play out pretty naturally with the dilemmas of the characters being highlighted in a completely polished way so that they do not appear to be evil or be contemplating something cruelly bizarre, even when they do so. The play centres on a Ben Harcourt, a man who used to work at the World Trade Center but due to his being away at the time of the attacks, spending leisure time with Abby Prescott, his boss as well as his mistress, both their lives are saved. This may seem exactly like the kind of characters who escaped death for all the wrong reasons, but this is how the dramatist would have it. The plot takes a wicked turn when the characters contemplate to use this tragedy as a shield to start a new life together and to delude a frenzied wife into believing that her husband died with the tragic collapse of the twin towers.

The play kicks off with the denial mode when Abby questions Ben about his spineless reluctance to receive his wife's call and tell her the truth that he is very much alive and is thinking of starting a new life with someone whom he loves for who she is, to the extent that he can even forsake his easygoing family life for the sake of it. But, throughout the play, Ben isn't able to muster courage enough to receive the call and face the situation directly. It is not that he is just having moral qualms over having to do something which may be heartless but somewhere his hesitation to do so is also reflected clearly in the deeply scathing dialogues as the play progresses. Morality, however, does not appear as much as a virtue in LaBute's plays as a foil to it. Gerald C. Wood observes:

Neil LaBute's interest in morality isn't moralistic, however. Most obviously, he finds dark humour in the self-delusions, paralysis, and irresponsibility of his characters. Sometimes ...he is even sympathetic to his most confused and destructive people, recognizing that they are less innocent and more emotionally interactive than some of their victims. (Wood 2)

LaBute is sympathetic to the moral dilemma of Ben Harcourt as well, and skillfully proceeds to justify the baffled and seemingly unfeeling character of his male protagonist by the end of the play. Here is a man who is shown to be frustrated with his married life and desires an immediate escape and when he has a chance to do so, his heart starts to vacillate and his indecisiveness gets the better of him. This is precisely the reason why Abby refers to him as a "flake" for he could not gather strength enough to take the call and talk to his wife, if only to comfort her that he is

safe and sound. Abby is a composite character too, in that she stresses on Ben's confronting his wife with the bare truth right from the beginning of the play but when she discerns that he is more comfortable in the other option, that of misleading his wife into believing him to be dead and start a fresh life with her, she tries to reason it out with herself and justify the opinion that comes into his mind solely because it gives her an opportunity to have a life with him. Although, later she again brings him back to face his indecision and demands absolute clarity of things as they are.

Dominick LaCapra in his pioneering deliberation on the founding traumas as legitimating myth of origins, as elaborated in his iconic work, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, has discussed 9/11 as a founding trauma for the American society:

And, in the aftermath of the cold war, 9/11 provided a new enemy that could unite the country in solidarity against the terrorists or even the more abstract notion of terror itself. One advertisement that quickly appeared on television in the wake of 9/11 showed people of diverse ages, colours, and accents affirming "I am an American". To be good American or even a good human being, you were in a sense obliged to have been traumatized by 9/11 and to bear the signs of its post-traumatic effects including support for the war on terror... (LaCapra xiii)

But, what concerns us here is the emphasis that as a patriotic citizen of the nation, one was "obliged" to have been traumatized by the attacks on the World Trade Center even though they may not truly feel so from the depth of their psyche. Such is the situation of the characters in the play under discussion. Ben and Abby, both, seem to be affected by the havoc that is being played around them but their inner selves are seemingly unharmed and unaltered by the turn of events. They feel lost and uncertain as to what has just happened around them and how they have miraculously been spared but, they do not seem to comprehend the depth of emotion such a catastrophe should naturally unfold:

Abby: Almost an entire day since it happened.

Ben: I know that.

Abby: I mean, the world has gone absolutely nuts out there; it really, really has ... No Idea what's happening, no one does, the army patrolling around – there are people in camouflage on the Brooklyn Bridge – and you're, I don't know, just ... I don't know where you are.

Ben: Abby, I'm right here.

Abby: Why is that not comforting when you say it. (LaBute, *The Mercy Seat* 10)

Even though the events of the day would go on to be deeply devastating for the American psyche, here we have a character more concerned about personal advantage than a national loss. What is even more astounding is that Ben is saved only on account of his deception, his knowingly cheating on his wife. He completely overlooks the fact that he was saved by sheer luck as it could very well have been his last day on earth had he and Abby been out there working in the World Trade Center, as their workplace was located in the building. Rather than being numbed by the faint survival he had by chance, his mind gets to plot an escape around the scenario which is what becomes disturbing for Abby as she is expected to trust her future with a man who is least bothered to plunge his own family, his wife and innocent children into devastation just for an easy getaway.

Abby is a character seemingly more sound and sensible than Ben is reflected to be, since it is she who does not fit anyhow into the traditional role of the home-wrecker. Moreover, she

confronts Ben threadbare on his humanity when she spells out his expediency in cashing on the turn of events to his own personal advantage:

Abby: ...When I was out there, walking around, staring at people ... I suddenly wondered how you feel about it. I mean, really feel about what's happened.

Ben: I feel like everybody else does. / I do!

Abby: I don't think that's true. / No, uh-uh. (Beat.) 'Cause after the shock of it, okay, after the obvious sort of shock that anyone goes through ... your first thought was that this is an opportunity...

Ben: Yeah, but I meant ... for us. / Just as a possibility for us...

Abby: Who does that?! / Who in their right mind is going to see ... this... as having "unlimited potential"? (LaBute, *The Mercy Seat* 11)

She openly corners him on his view that this incident appeared as a 'meal ticket' for them and it is up to them to take it or leave it. The entire conversation follows the typical colour of the battle of the sexes as deep down what she really wishes to ascertain is that the man she has chosen for herself is not an unfeeling moron. She expresses her desire for Ben to go out on the streets and help the people struggling to locate their loved ones there. To make her point she even narrates the incident of a woman putting up flyers asking for any update on a man missing since the attacks took place and how she followed her, just to observe what she had to go through: "This whole city is covered in copies..." What is ironical is that though she expects Ben to be a little more responsible member of the community and step out to help other people in distress but when an opportunity to do so turns up for her, she is equally clueless as to what to do and just renders to be a passive onlooker. Christopher Bigsby comments in this regard:

They have discussed the attack, expressed their sense of relief to one another and the subsequent guilt at feeling such relief. But he seemingly incapable of registering the full shock of the event not least because private issues take precedence. He falls back on a rhetoric whose falsity is a sign of something more than the incapacity of language to register trauma. For her part, Abby describes seeing a woman on the streets fixing photographs of a young man on light poles, buildings, cars, with the slogan, "'Have you seen him?'" and a phone number.' (14) Implicit in this, of course, is his own failure to answer the telephone, to put an end to his own wife's fear and anxiety. Yet, Abby, too, is complicit in this. As he points out, she has no more laid aside her private life to help people than he has. She has, after all, been urging him to abandon his wife to serve her own desires. (Bigsby 111)

Hence, Abby turns out to be pretty inert when the moment for her to be able to actually help a woman in distress comes up. It should not be presumed that she did not care for the what the woman was going through but that the shock of the entire scenario had created such a loss in her psyche that she was unable to do much other than just following the lady while she was sticking the photographs. She could not as much as say a comforting words or two so that the woman might have felt a bit calm but when she is back within the safety of the four walls of her very own apartment she starts narrating the incident to Ben in order to prick him to move out and help such people. She completely overlooks her own inability to have acted as necessary but she expects Ben to be upfront like the men in the army in order to safeguard the people of their society.

Discussing the matter in worldly terms, Ben's practical approach is also justifiable. He clearly outlines that their society has a custom of recovery from such situations and it is obvious that this is a catastrophe but one from which they shall recoil with much strong determination and even take revenge from those responsible. But, this does not imply that they would stop celebrating their festivals in the meantime or stop going to the movies or taking a long vacation to have a leisure time. The main idea is that no matter what the society goes through, life goes on: "I am saying the American way is to overcome, to conquer, to come out on top." (16) He accepts that this attack is a national disaster but that does not mean that it should shroud each and every aspect of their lives. The society as a whole shall revive soon from the deadly shock of these attacks on the World Trade Center and the culprits shall be brought to justice. But, when something else of national significance happens, people will move on. Therefore, if he is trying to see this as having an opportunity for them to start a fresh life, it is not selfish and insensitive of him to do so. Although, even his view is not free of contradictions and Abby continues to challenge him in that regard. The age difference between the two characters is also crucial to the matters under discussion in the play. Abby, aged around forty-five, is significantly older to Ben who is a young man of thirty-three. She consistently pops up references to things and people to which Ben doesn't relate. One such reference central to the play's theme is to Audie Leon Murphy, one of the most revered American soldiers of World War II. He represented all the ideal virtues of heroism, valour, devotion and patriotism which Ben lacked. She describes how Audie was bold enough at a very tender age to enlist into the army even though he was underage and had to forge documents in favour of meeting the minimum age requirements and how he suffered the adversities during the war but continued to fight for his country. He even turned into an actor and played himself in a motion picture which was based on his own bitter experiences during the war. When compared to someone like him, Ben's stagnation to so much as step out of the door to help those in need is astonishing.

Audie Murphy's reference underplays another significant angle of the trauma studies which has been emphatically forwarded by Cathy Caruth, one of the acclaimed pioneers in the field. The phenomenon known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been defined by Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience*, as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." (57-58) Such is the case of Audie Murphy who could be said to have been suffering from what would today be termed as post-traumatic stress disorder. After a considerable period of time of the culmination of the war, Murphy was observed to have been suffering from a complex sleeping disorder to the extent that not only did he rely on sleeping pills but his psyche was so brutally ruptured that he used to sleep with a loaded handgun under his pillow. This just reaffirms what Caruth specifically states with regard to a soldier at war:

The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this site in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. (Caruth 11)

The constant feeling of a damaged identity and of a threatened existence that leaves the individual at a loss is quite central to the entire debate on trauma studies. Abby would prefer if Ben would show such heroic courage to face up to the situation at present, the attacks on the twin towers of

the World Trade Center, but to no effect. On the other hand, the shock of the situation seems to have pushed both of them to a state of a vulnerable inertia. Whereas, Abby does not actually move out to help those in distress but is simply able to pursue a woman sticking copies of missing man, Ben is unable to receive the call of his wife for his mind has also stopped responding in a coherent manner. The sudden violence of the attacks weighs heavy on his psychological setup so much that he argues with Abby over his daughter: "Look at it out there! It's ...I mean, those buildings are just, like, gone." (27) He realizes that his daughter must be weeping inconsolably and his family would be worried dead regarding his whereabouts but, he is simply unable to muster courage enough to talk to them for his mind is not functioning in a rational manner.

Opportunism in the wake of a global tragedy is the core theme underlying the play. It is pivotal to how the play came to be written too. The playwright, Neil LaBute, was onboard a flight destined for New York when it got cancelled due the attacks on the World Trade Center and he was compelled to take a long and arduous train ride which he felt to be pretty "inconvenient". But, just then he realized that this was not a very empathetic thought to have. The author's own self-centred outlook received a new inspiration in the following year when he was on another plane and thought to himself, "what a person would really do if they were afforded a chance to wipe the slate clean and start life over". (ix) This idea gave birth to the conception of the character of Ben. It would not be really true to say that Ben is a heartless opportunist who does not care at all for his family. There are several instances in the play to prove that he is in a state of perpetual dilemma over receiving his wife's call and of starting a fresh life with Abby. His is a pragmatic view of the situation which is clearly worded when he states:

Ben: ...This is not me. Like me, that is. This whole thing. Idea. I'm not normally like that. I just ... But when I looked at it, for even a second, all I could see is, yeah, it's sad, it's just unbelievably horrid and all that shit, but ...this is it. This is the moment. Our moment. Everything comes down to what we decide right here. Today. I use my Discover card to get picked up on a mini-mart video camera, it's over. Finished. (LaBute, *The Mercy Seat* 31)

Ben is not a wicked person at heart, but he also realizes that he could not do much to soothe the effects of this dastardly incident, however much he tries. Here he could be seen to be representing Dominick LaCapra's concept of "working through" trauma which he takes up from Freud. In the *working through*, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish what happened in the past with what goes on in the present. Similar is the case of Ben, who struggles to maintain a critical alienation from the havoc of the world outside and strives to preserve a chance of a secured future within the confines of that apartment. Even so, he consistently disregards the emotional turmoil his family is apparently going through and so he is bound to be labeled as an opportunist in that sense. He acknowledges that there have been times when he has felt guilty about cheating on his wife and then has been avoiding Abby too, but when Abby suggests that he should walk away from her if being with her makes him feel guilty, he refuses. She says that he should switch on his phone and inform his wife that he is safe, but he is scared of jeopardizing the one chance life has suddenly served to them on a platter, however unexpectedly and unhappily.

Ben even claims that he has been sitting on the couch in that apartment staring into vacant space for a day reminiscing about the several people that he became acquainted with while working at the World Trade Center. His mind is in a state of terrible shock that all those people were just mercilessly wiped out from the face of the earth and no one knows what to make of it

yet. It is true that he has seen this as an opportunity to start a new life somewhere far away from the city, but the sense of a national trauma and a personal one that haunts his family and would certainly go on to plague them for the rest of their lives, is also a quandary with which he is compelled to engage with agonizing urgency:

Ben: you think I like the idea of those little girls growing up without a father? Huh?! Well, I don't... but it's a hell lot better this way, letting 'em think whatever happened, okay, rather than dragging them through court for a year and fighting over who gets which Barbie, and for how long, and at which designated location! (Beat.) (LaBute, *The Mercy Seat* 60)

The beats at the end of certain dialogues are one of the emphatic creative devices that LaBute uses to generate an impact. When analyzed on the basis of stylistic parameters, LaBute's play, with its very structure and dialogues, creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and predicament. The matter-of-fact tone of the conversation between the two characters leads one to miss the depth of stigma by being lost in the simplicity of the dialogues. Ben is in a state of shock at what has happened in the community around him, but he is more puzzled by the alteration in his stance from the previous day, due to the 9/11 attacks. His earlier resolve to stay with his family and leave Abby for the sake of his daughters, is weakened as soon as he realizes that these attacks have made it possible for him to lead a life he truly desires as well as save his family, and especially his young daughters, the peril of having to go through arduous courtly proceedings and a deeply affecting feeling of humiliation. Abby's dialogues are more sharp and direct for she knows how to speak the absolute truth even if it makes him uncomfortable. She keeps on reminiscing about the day they first met and how he used to love her so much back then. Somehow, that peace and trust between them has evaded all these years and now she finds it hard to trust a man who is unable to accept her openly and needs the shield of a tragic happening to start a life based on false grounds. When the play approaches the climax, Abby asks him to make the call he was about to make a day prior to the attacks took place. It is then that Ben comes up with the climactic revelation that the call he was about to make the preceding day was actually to her, not to his wife. On his way to work, he changed his mind, almost as if by a divine will, and thought of stopping over at Abby's place to talk to her. The 'call' he was about to make was actually intended for Abby. He was going to confess to her about his inability to forsake his family life, his loving wife and to drag his innocent children unnecessarily through the ordeals of the proceedings of the court. Therefore, it was Abby he was forced to forsake if it would come down to his children. But, the attacks of September 11, 2001, provided him with an opportunity to wipe out his existence without having to die and to start a new life with his lover. In the concluding moments of the play Abby asks him to make a clear choice as she could not move ahead on the course of a life which has such a crucial dilemma at its base. She reasserts one last time that he should call his family and talk to his wife because he really does love her and finds it hard to leave her. But, even by the end of the play Ben is unable to make that choice due to his being at a complete loss of sense about the way things have turned up to be and we are left with the call of his wife ringing incessantly as the curtain closes.

In his assessment of Neil LaBute's dramaturgy in his book titled, *Neil LaBute: Stage and Cinema*, C. W. E. Bigsby charts out several instances of bitter opportunism generated within days of the 9/11 attacks in which people from the general public to the administration as a whole were found involved in abusing the tragedy for personal gains under false pretexts. He opines thus:

9/11 spawned a disturbing number of criminal cases as it slowly emerged that FBI and other government officials had stolen artefacts from ground zero, that bogus charities were set up, false claims submitted (including some of the claims for nearly three hundred thousand air conditioners and vacuums to deal with contaminated air and dust), family members invented only to meet a fictional and ultimately lucrative death. At a moment of trauma, and shortly thereafter, there were those whose minds were focused not on a shared pain, the desire to help or mourn, but on the opportunities unexpectedly and fortuitously opened up by disaster. (Bigsby 105)

Bigsby provides several cases of named people who have been found to be guilty of grand larceny for they received material compensation on the basis of false and even invented claims. Some reported of a missing partner when in reality, they did not even have one and other falsely claimed of the death of their family members just for petty financial gains. These real life instances are enough to prove that 9/11 did not give rise to a unidirectional impulse of remorse and grief but that it is truly possible for human beings to be opportunistic even at a time of such great national tragedy. Not just this, Bigsby even observes how this opportunism spread at the level of administration as well:

Not least among their number was an American administration heavily influenced by those who in the 1990s had been part of the Project for a New American Century and who now found themselves in a position of power. Hence, virtually the first direction given by President George W. Bush was to explore the supposed involvement of Iraq, that country having been high on the list of the neo-conservatives. The effect was to convince a high proportion of American citizens that 9/11 had involved a state with whom they would, in truth, soon go to war. Private exploitation of catastrophe plainly had its parallel in a public exploitation. (Bigsby 105)

This is a clear criticism of the erroneous stance that the Bush administration took which turned out to be a disaster and ruined Iraq completely. Today, there are many who vehemently criticize the position senselessly adopted by the US government of the day just in order to satisfy its own lust for vengeance and its excessive pride in its military prowess. It was later established that Iraq had no involvement in the 9/11 attacks and that a generation of the country's citizens were subjected to severe brutalities in the name of justice that had left an indelible trauma of its own on the community's psyche. But, what is even more disturbing is the fact that the American establishment of the day was able to convince its abiding citizens that such a destructive stance based on assumed beliefs was justified and that violence, hard and fatal was the only answer. The demand for retaliation and revenge overpowered common sense to the extent that a majority of the people at the time felt that what the government was doing was necessary and the only way peace and security could be restored. Therefore, the only way that the administration saw it fit to respond to the attacks of September 11, 2001, was antithetical to the celebrated virtues of peace and harmony.

Concluding the discussion, it can be surmised that *The Mercy Seat* plays out the war of the sexes which is a typical strategy of Neil LaBute's works but it also merges it with an intense dramatic give and take to show how a moment of international grief and tragedy could debilitate senses of normal human beings who become victims of vicarious trauma, as do the

characters in the play. As evident from the personal confession of the author in the preface, the play attempts to assess the conflict of an individual being truly expedient at a time of universal selflessness:

The Destruction of two buildings in New York city and the unfathomable loss of life that followed hangs like a damaged umbrella over the events of *The Mercy Seat*. Yet it is not a play that concerns itself with the politics of terrorism. Perhaps it does, actually, but it is a particular kind of terrorism: the painful, simplistic warfare we often wage on the hearts of those we profess to love. (LaBute IX)

A catastrophe of the nature and magnitude of 9/11 is bound to be seen as a negative incident but here in the play, the attacks seem to offer up a positive signal for the protagonists. Few theorists of trauma in the cultural studies have pointed out that a catastrophe which comes to be regarded as a national tragedy also has a positive outcome in that it brings a current of solidarity and unity in an otherwise divided society. However, the positive impact in the play is of a different kind in which a man schemes to use the tragic incident as a cover to start a new life with a woman with whom he has an extramarital affair. The attacks might be very opportune for the characters in the play but still the effect bears a negative undertone because it is a kind of taxing onslaught on the psyche of the wife who is fretful for the news of her husband's safety at the very moment he is busy planning to aggravate her misery, as also on the innocent young daughters who must be weeping their hearts out for their beloved father to come home soon. The play is a well crafted dramatic piece which appreciably clashes a national trauma and a feeling of sympathy and melancholy with overpowering selfish interests and comfortable expediency.

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