

Understanding the issues of gender and class in Safdar Hashmi's writing

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Introduction

“Agar hum bade natak nahi le ja sakte janta ke beech to hum chote natak le ke jayenge” this reflects the concern of the Safdar Hashmi is to take the theatre to the deprived sections of the society. Hashmi, a theatre activist with the political purpose aims for the establishment of the society that is free of any biases. Hesought to dismantle the gender, caste and class issues in the society. Though India has progressed and is a democratic country but Gender and class issue still prevails in our society. Indian constitution which affirms equality irrespective of class, creed and gender is sham. Considering the Gender issues, the plight of Indian women in India was miserable from the very beginning and were considered as ‘second citizens’. Control on female sexuality is one of the ideological female planks on which patriarchy rests. The concept of equality, as a correlation to the concept of individual freedom is alien to Indian society as men are dominating and women are dominated. Indian culture has always induce women to be subservient, inferior and has applauded their self - effacement. Society forbid women to have any desire, voice and identity as these are considered the domain of males. Safdar Hashmi play *Aurat* deals with the problem confronted by the women since her birth. The play makes an inquiry into the status of women at every level as an obedient daughter, sister, faithful wife, a worker and so on.

The play exposes the dominant, patriarchal notions of womanhood. Women throughout her life plays any roles and is subordinated by her father or brother initially then by her husband. The play begins with the girl willingness to go to school and study but her father prevents her going to school. She is denied to go to school as education was considered as domain of patriarchy. Father asserts “Ghar me baitho or ghar ka kaamkaj karo. kya karogi school jake? Tumhe konsa daftar dabana hai.” (*Aurat* 31) Later, college faculty refuse to give her admission in the course which she wanted to pursue. The male authority imposes their will by forcing her to take homescience or interior decoration which was considered fit for educating a girl. Thus for a girl, the desire for education becomes a path full of struggle. Similar was the condition *Rassundri Devi* which she discloses in her autobiography *Amar Jiban*. Unable to endure the hardship and the restrictions that has been imposed upon her, she asks the question which shakes the very foundation of the patriarchal set up within women occupy marginal position: “just because I am a woman, Does not necessarily mean that trying to educate myself is a crime” She justifies her desire for education but the society clearly disguise the female desire to educate and enlighten herself. Males on the other hand has supreme rights to study and assert their will, Misfortunes does not end here After completing the education, and

unemployment is the major issue that the majority of women face. If some of the women manages to get the job they are sexually harassed and exploited at the work place. In the play when the woman goes for an interview she is looked as an object of desire, The interviewee ogles at her and seems to be more interested in her body than her degree. Agitated by the condition she raised voice by marching against unemployment but she was treated brutally by the police authorities later was accused by her father, who says that he never wanted her to go to school and get educated as education has made her rebellious and resulted in coming out of her cocoon. Educated women were taken as source of destruction in the society and This is the ideology concerning female education which the society harbors and perpetuates. People despise woman of learning. He repents that she has lost her character? Who will marry her and how he will show his face to other family members?.

Marxism views that those who possess means of production assure position in the society. Marxism always held capitalism responsible for the oppression of women as it widened the sexual difference among male and female and has created such material condition which perpetuates patriarchal dominance. He also blame capitalism for the unjustified sexual division of labour. Therefore the ontological reality under capitalism is that it does offer any possibility of creating yourself. It often commodifies yourself, Capitalism is solely serving its own purpose through this entry women are paid less wages. “the acceptance of equal wages for equal work both for men and women will definitely a mark of higher consciousness - the desirable position. But such acceptance has not reached yet”. In the play the woman is not paid equal wages as men. She asserts: “sabke barabar kaam karti hu phir bhi kamm dihadhi milti hai or upar se dant dapt”. (*Aurat* 38) In the final scene, she is expelled by the owner when she demands equal wage to men. It is her co- workers who exhort her to protest against the owner's action. She hesitates and even stoops down to his leg, begging forgiveness but owner shows no mercy towards her. Thus I agree with the Marxist view that capitalism has widened the sexual difference is one of the reason for the oppression of women.

“The custom of early marriage, it seems, recognizes and is designed to guard against the promiscuous resurgence in adolescence of a girl's playful childhood sexuality [.,,] to marry one's daughter off propitiously is considered one of the primary religious duties of Hindu parents. Indeed: Reprehensible is the father who gives not his daughter at the proper time” (Shankar Jha, 145). At the age when the girls are likely to receive formal education, they got married. Marriage which is a sacred ceremony and matter of celebration for the

other members of the family become a matter of grief and torture for the women as it entails bondage and imprisonment. Rassundri Devi compares herself to the sacrificial goat who is being dragged to alter as she is given away in the marriage. At a stage when a girl doesn't understand the domesticity and nemesis of marriage, they were thrown into the shackles of bondage which leads to hopelessness and entrapment. She is expected to be 'pati-vrata' which means devotion to her husband and an obedient wife enclosed within the zodiac of his husband's whims. And if her husband turns out to be unworthy, she still has to live with him as there is no going back. Manu enjoins "though destitute of virtue of seeking pleasure elsewhere, devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife" (Shankar Jha, 147) and the perception, if she violates her duty she will be disgraced in this world and also after death 'she will enter the womb of a jackal and is tormented by the punishment of her sin' were infused in the minds of the young girls. Her real family after her marriage is her husband's family. She is conditioned to perform all the household tasks unflinchingly and without complaint. In the play *Aurat*, priest make her vow to revere her in laws, to serve her husband as a devotee serves God. He claims "saans ki aagya manogi, pati ko sakshat bhagwan janogi, [...] sada aankhe niche rakhogi. Ghar ka kaam kaaj tum hi sambhalogi". (*Aurat*, 33). She is supposed to shift her loyalties from her own family to her husband's family.

After marriage, women are subjected to perpetual pain and problems of pregnancy. For men, women becomes only the object or machine of reproduction. Her position in the family depends on the her bearing of a male child "she is a true wife who hath borne a son", fathers very seldom wish to have daughter and Girl child is considered as liability for the family. After the child is born, the mother is greatly distressed to learn that little stranger is a daughter and neighbours turn their noses to manifest their disgust and indignation at the occurrence of such phenomenon. In the *Shakuntala: The Mahabharata Story*, she reminding the Dushyant the forgotten vows asserts that 'they are father on occasion of religious acts, mother in sickness and woes'. True are the words of *Shakuntala*, when some sacred duty has to be performed then the role of father is very prestigious and mothers are responsible for the nurturing of the child and tend all his needs. In play *Aurat* when the child cries, the husband calls the wife 'chup kara ise, nahi to uthake bhar fek de' (*Aurat* 33) Thus apart for doing all the household chores she is the sole nurture of her children and hold no better position than the servant in the household toiling day and night and her work is remain unacknowledged. She is confined within the four walls as coming out of the private domain was supposed to be a threat to her security.

Thus the play delineates with the woman enacting many roles is expressing her perturbation and rebelling against the society for her liberation claiming "mai ek azad aurat hu [...] ek aurat jo kaam karte hue seekh gayi hai ki laal jhanda kaise uthaya jata hai" (*Aurat* 31). Today, the position of the women in the society has undergone a drastic change. women have started questioning against stereotypical norms set by patriarchy that considered women as an inferior sex. After the tenacious struggle, women have now departed their conventional role of reproducers, wives and mothers only and are managing both the public - private domain efficiently

which is very different from the ancient women who were expected to 'caged bird' but has now they flapped their wings, touching the heights.

Safdar Hashmi theatre also delineate with the class issues faced by the working men and women and their struggle against the dominant capitalist class. The *Machine* was written after the brutal crackdown of the protest at Herig India. Workers agitated by the continuous exploitation by the capitalist, unfulfilled demands left with no option to go on strike. They demanded basic necessary things that is a space for the parking of the cycle and a canteen to make tea but when management refused even to fulfill these basic demands they revolted and as a result six workers were killed. The play deals with the ruthless exploitative capitalist who enjoy a liberty of unregulated profiteering and workers on the other hand who are subdued by them. *Machine* is the metaphoric presentation of the capitalist system. The flawless running of the machine suggests the existence of cordial relationship between the different means of production that is the capitalist, workers, authority of the police and other supporting system. A mill owner is able to produce maximum profit with the coordination and cooperation of all above factors but profit maximization is hindered if there is a breakdown in the coordination. Behind this apparent mutual support and cordial relationship, there lies an exploitation. The bond between them is illusionary. "The play is an attempt to enter into an analysis of capitalist structure through an image to which all the workers share tremendous intimacy - the machine"

As the text unfolds we are acquainted with the actors presenting themselves as parts of machine and making a squeaky sound suggesting the breakdown of the machine. It is at this point sutradhar enters and gives the analysis of the maximum production by this machine. It is due to the their togetherness and mutual support that capitalist system is running successfully "or agar ek purja bhi na chale to dusra band, islie to kaam karte hai sath - sath -- maalik or majdoor, Thakur or harijaan [...] sath- sath, sath-sath". (*Machine* 10) Thus it depicts the dependence of the capitalist class on the proletariats and depicts workers as the valuable component in the society. It presents the worry for tea and bread as the legitimate demand as contrast to the demand of mill owner that is 'whisky from London'. Any monopolistic tendencies or negligence of any essential component could bring the break in the system. As a reward of diligent toiling, they are provided with inhuman working conditions in the factories, low payment and overtime and this compelled the workers to break away from the system.

The exploitation of workers, convenience of bourgeoisie is mentioned in almost all his plays. His idea of liberation, Equality and an idea of classless society is based on the Marx idea of an egalitarian society. Marxism has always been centered upon class and economic system prevalent in the society where people are distinguished according to the work they perform and thus described as 'gender blind' by Heidi Heartman. Marx identified capitalism as the cause of unsatisfactory socio- economic situation. *Machine* exemplify issues belonging to the lower strata of society and an attempt for the egalitarian society. Marx idea of the society where the proletariat belonging to the base and bourgeoisie belongs to the superstructure comes across in the play. It also shows how the bourgeoisie is hindering the growth and exploiting the

proletariat. The superstructure which includes police, security officer imposes their will by subduing their demands. When workers demanded a place for parking the bicycle and a canteen, the capitalist aggressively says “chai roti ! chai roti ! arey chai roti ke alawa koi or kaam bht ata hai tumhe’(machine 13) and even orders security officer to strike ‘lathi charge’ and fire on them. Thus there is an illegal suppression of dissenting voice in the society by most of the social apparatus. The superstructure including security officer, mill worker misusetheir power to suppress the voice that comes from the proletariat.

Like Marx idea of egalitarian society, Hashmi’s play brings out a similar plea. The play does not end with the workers lying dead but the slogans ‘Inquilab zindabad’ (long live revolution) that is a voice from the lower strata urging for equality and a classless society. Workers refused to be subdued and promise to fight against exploitation.

Both the plays end with the hope for the equal rearrangement which critically reflects on and offer a radical alternative to the prevailing order. It is a plea for utopian society where any kind of discrimination based on class and gender needs to be demolished. Therefore, in the current order the bias against women and specially with regard to their participation in the distribution of power has become more pronounced with development.

Reference

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