

Drama as a Presentation of Self

Abheyender singh

Research Scholar, CMJ University Shillong



OVERVIEW

The History of Drama, in the strict sense of the history of Western theatre, beginning from Greek times to the times of the Absurd theatre, has been reviewed by several scholars such as Sylvén Bامت, Morton Berman and William Burto (1972), Irving Deer and Harriet A. Deer (1975), James Calderwood and Harold Toliver (1969). Each of these scholars brought out the evolution of a particular aspect of Western theatre (hereafter Drama) in this long history. But one theme, which needs to be elaborately traced through this history, is the one suggested by Irving Deer and Harriet A. Deer, in their book *Selves : Drama in perspective* (1975). The Deers, in this book, studied various forms of Drama from the point of view of the self. They use the word self to mean the human personality, the human object, the individual or in other words, human identity. After tracing this theme of the self in the history of Drama, the Deers have come up with a remarkable observation that the history of Drama presents the "individual's perennial search for self fulfilment" (1975 : vii). For the Deers, self fulfilment is self-realization, i.e., the experience of one's idea of oneself. According to them, the playwrights create characters who seek an answer to the question "Am I?" This search of the self for an answer may not lead to a clear self-knowledge. But still the self, i.e., the character, to fulfill (realize) its idea of itself. The Deers review Drama from this point of view and conclude that all Drama has, perennially, been is a presentation of the individual's self

The review of the Deers indicates that they restricted their analysis to the study of only those which fall under the genres of Tragedy and Tragicomedy, which have always been considered Drama, in contrast to Comedy, which mostly presents farces and is treated as "tragedy's poor sister, an inferior, unserious and essentially trivial form" (Watson, 1983 : 81). Aristotle too, in his poetics, considers Tragedy as serious while he feels that Comedy "imitates characters of a lower type" (1951 : 21).

According to though the theme of self and its fulfillment is common to all forms of Drama, different Dramatists have presented the individual's search for self-fulfillment differently. In the preface to their book, the Deers playwrights who consider the self-subordinate to the design of the universe tend to subordinate character to plot, as Sophocles does in *Oedipus the King*; while those who considered the self-superior usually make character at least as important if not more important than plot, as does in *A Doll's House*. Similarly, playwrights who see diminishing order in the universe generally create characters who, like the protagonist in Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, are in danger of losing their sense of themselves and their place in the world. Playwrights who see no immanent order in the universe or society - only an arbitrary one imposed by human beings - tend to write extremely subjective plays wherein the characters try to create order through their own imagination, as is demonstrated in *Madwoman of Chaillot*... " (1975: vii).

As can be seen from the above words, for the Deers, what marks the presentation of each Dramatist is the or a theory through which the Dramatist to analyse the self. This is indicated also when the Deers note that the answer to the question of "Am I?" sought by the Dramatists is "often factual, psychological, social, and even religious"

This notion of a of course, reminds one of the investigative or exploring nature of science. In other words, Deers, here, can be seen to be talking about Drama in the model of science. This kind of analogy of science to Drama is well established even earlier to Deers. For example, Arthur Millier says, "...Drama is like other inventions of man in that it ought to help us to know more.The ultimate justification of a genuine new form. Is the new and heightened consciousness it creates and makes possible - a consciousness of causation in the light of known but hitherto inexplicable

effects." (1957 : 53). Miller considers that (like science) the 'end of drama' is the creation of this "higher consciousness' Of the determinism or causation which is often explained in terms of laws of nature' (Deer, et.al., 1975:2).

Miller uses the word teaching' in reference to this creation of 'higher consciousness' (1957 :12-3). This creation of higher consciousness' has been intended to give prescription, in both science and in drama, to cure or solve the human problems. The word teaching or instruction is used in reference to Drama even in this sense of prescription. Mercier(in Dukore, 1974 : 138) and Johnson (in Dukore, 1974 : 408), using the word instruction, in reference to Drama in both the senses, say that Drama instructs in a pleasurable manner. Rapin, who uses the word instruction in the moral sense, agrees with this point and gives an analogy to show this. He says : "In curing the maladies of men, [art] makes use of the same artifice that physicians have recourse to in the sickness of children : they mingle honey with the

medicine to take off the bitterness For no other end is [art] delightful than that it may be profitable." (in Dukore, 1974:265). The notions of and found in the above mentioned analysis of Deers and Miller, help to discuss the probe of self in various forms of Drama through the following four part structure : (i) the theory of such as religious, psychological, sociological and so on; (ii) the notion of the self (which exists in 'nature"); (iii) the diagnosis of the predicament of the self or those qualities in the self which deny the self its fulfillment; and (iv) instruction. Taking a cue from the Deers, an attempt will be made here to use the four part structure to analyse different forms of serious' Drama (Tragedy and Tragicomedy) from Greek to modern times. However, considering the richness and vastness each of the forms under discussion, it is a difficult task to attempt a review of all of them elaborately. Hence a brief study will be made by providing a few examples from each of these forms.

CHANGING SELF IN VARIOUS FORMS OF DRAMA.

Greek Theatre : Self under the control of gods.

fact that the tragedies of Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus and others, written more than two millenniums ago, are staged and discussed even now, demonstrates the universality of the tragic actions that were presented on the Greek stage. The Greek Tragedy presented nature as governed by the gods. There is a direct intervention of the gods in the action of the plays.

They either appear in the play to decide the fate of the selves, as in the case of The Bacchae by Euripides, in which the god Dionysus makes the selves act in the fashion he wants them to and punishes them for rejecting him; or their intervention may be indirect as seen in Oedipus the King (Sophocles) where the fate destined by the gods is revealed by the at Delphi.

The self (chief character) of Greek Tragedy is of noble birth. It is shown as possessing a tendency to act against the gods, a quality which is called Hubris. This may be seen in The Bacchae, cited above, in which the citizens of Thebes do not accept Dionysus when he appears there as a new god. The self is depicted as being in the pursuit of the passions such as sex, power and revenge, and in the process it is shown to be disturbing the natural order by acting against the commands of the gods. The self is shown to indulge in grotesque actions such as incest, parricide, fratricide and infanticide Oedipus, for example, commits both incest and parricide in j^g play Oedipus the King; the two sons of Oedipus kill each other in Antigone (Sophocles); possessed by a desire for revenge, Medea, in the play of the same name (Euripides), murders her own children; and Agave in The Bacchae (Euripides) dismembers her own son. Driven by the irresistible passions, the selves are often shown to be causing misfortune to themselves, sometimes to their family and sometimes even to the whole state. The Greek tragedy shows the hero falling down from his noble position and experiencing misery.

Upon experiencing this downfall, the self often comes to learn about its mistake and accepts the fate destined for it by the gods An example of this can be found in Oedipus The King, where Oedipus says, "And the man who called down these curses [of gods] on me was I myself, no one else" (Sophocles in Deer, et.al., 1975 ; 41).

This feature, in Greek Tragedy, of gaining of knowledge by the self about its mistake, is described by critics as Anagnorisis (Barnet, et.al., 1972 : 6-7) a word originally coined by Aristotle, which is often translated as recognition. This word had a simpler meaning for Aristotle. Anagnorisis, according to him meant, "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune" (1951 :41). He gives the same example, given above, from Oedipus the King. Here, the meaning a change from ignorance to knowledge' is simple. Before the messenger informs about who Oedipus is, he was not aware that the king and queen of Corinth were not his real parents - this was his ignorance. After the messenger told him, he knew the reality - this is Barnet

and others, however, consider that the later critics gave a richer meaning to the concept of and used it to describe the self's recognition of its own mistake; The recognition of the self about its mistake is believed by the critics to bring about an elevation in its consciousness.

To depict the actions of the self in a well ordered world (governed by the gods), the Dramatists chose a well constructed plot. According to Aristotle, a good Tragedy must have "for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle and an end" (1951 : 34-5). This can be seen to be corresponding to a unity in the world governed by the The Dramatists for their work, mostly borrowed the themes from legends, though they often improvised them.

By thus presenting the tragedy of the selves in a well ordered world, the Greek Tragedy reveals the following law of nature : the which the natural the gods, to its passions, falls down as the natural order reasserts itself. In fact, this law of nature has often been directly revealed, either through the words of the characters or the chorus. The chorus in Oedipus The King, for example, says, 'The man who goes his way overbearing in word and deed,

fears no justice, Honors no temples of the gods- May an evil destiny seize him And punish his ill - star'd pride (Sophocles in Deer, et.al., 1975 : 42)."

As it is popularly known, Aristotle and others who followed him, have evolved a theory of the purpose of Tragedy in terms of the effect it creates on the audience. Before dealing with the effect of tragedy on the audience, Aristotle first points out that the chief character in the tragedy should be an important person, almost virtuous, because the downfall of an important person evokes pity in the audience. The hero experiences misfortune because he makes an error which Aristotle (1951 : 45-6). He gives the example of Oedipus whose mistake is the assumption that Polybus and Merope are his parents. When Oedipus hears that he is fated to murder his father and marry his mother, he runs away from his state. The play shows that the very attempt of escaping from the fate leads him towards it. He runs away from his foster parents and kills his real father (Laius) and performs incest with his mother (Jacosta). For Aristotle, the mistake (Hamertia) that the tragic hero commits is accidental and therefore worthy of sympathy to the audience.

Aristotle holds that through the of the actions of the tragic character which are pitiful and terrible, the poet (Dramatist) evokes pity and fear in the audience

effecting the purgation or Katharsis (or Catharsis) of these emotions and which ultimately results in pleasure (Butcher in Aristotle, 1951 242-246)

In his discussion on Aristotle's theory of Tragedy, Pierre Corneille sees a moral element along with the Cathartic effect. Elaborating Aristotle's theory of Catharsis, he argues that when the audience watch the character suffering misfortune (which is undeserved), they pity him/her. This makes them fear a similar fate that may befall them, since they witness it happening to men similar to themselves on the stage. This according to him leads to a "desire to avoid [the misfortune]; this desire leads to the wish to purge, to moderate, to rectify, even to eradicate in ourselves the emotion which, before our eyes, plunges persons that we pity into misfortune; for this ordinary but natural and indubitable reason : that to avoid the effect one must cut out the cause" (in Dukore, 1974 : 230).

In other words, according to Corneille's interpretation of the theory of Aristotle, by revealing the laws of nature, Tragedy effects a desire for the eradication of passions that lead to the experience of misfortune.

ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY: SELF AS A VICTIM OF PASSIONS.

The next major phase in the history of theatre, the Elizabethan period, also has several remarkable tragedies, written by Dramatists such as Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare.

The Elizabethan Tragedy too, like the Greek Tragedy, is the outcome of a religious world in Elizabethan Tragedy has a perfect order maintained by God (informed by Christianity). However, unlike Greek Tragedy, God does not appear directly in the play. The belief in His presence, as the one who controls the fate of the selves, is indicated through the speech of the characters in the play. For example, Lear in King Lear says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport." The chief characters in Elizabethan Tragedy were of high rank, as in Greek Tragedy, because their fall "evokes deeper woe and wonder than the snuffing out of a non-entity" (Barnet, et.al., 1972 : 198).

Like the Greek tragedies, the Elizabethan tragedies such as Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear and Othello by Shakespeare, show how the characters disturb the world around them due to the presence of some evil (Watson, 1983 : 76) in their personality such as excessive ambition (Macbeth), jealousy (Othello),

confusion (Hamlet) and lack of discrimination (Lear). The self seeks the gratification of the passions such as power (Macbeth), love or sex (Othello), love of other selves (Lear) and so on. As in Greek Tragedy, the indiscriminate search the self for the satiation of these passions destroys not only itself, but also its relation with the other selves as well as the natural Macbeth, for example, shows the chief character as disturbing the order in the state by desiring power through the murder of Duncan. The play describes the natural order as being "troubled with man's [Macbeth's] act." (II. iv.5-6). It shows how Macbeth turned his castle, which was a Heaven's breath' (I.vi.5), into a hell' (II.iii. 2). Othello with his jealousy and Lear with his lack of discrimination are depicted as creating misfortune for themselves and for the ones they love. Similarly, Hamlet with his confused thinking fails to Denmark (a task assigned to him by the ghost of his father) and thus restore order in the state. He also destroys his relationship with his beloved Ophelia.

It may be noted that here too, as in the Greek Tragedy, the evil' in the self brings with it, downfall. Macbeth, for example, succeeds in gaining the power which he relentlessly pursued, but he does not enjoy this power and in stead, pays dearly with his life. Similarly, Lear also loses his life for wrongly trusting Regan and Goneril who cause his death.

As with the Greek Tragedy, the selves here, also recognise their faults in the end. Othello, for example, at the end of his life realizes that he 'loved not wisely, but too well' (V.ii.348). Similarly, Lear (King Lear confesses his former ignorance, which led to reject Cordelia and take the empty words of Regan and Goneril seriously. This movement from ignorance to knowledge of their fault by the chief characters in the Elizabethan Tragedy is identified as Anagnorisis (recognition) by (the critics such as) Bamet and others (1972 : 7).

However, unlike in the case of Greek tragedy, the focus is not on the fate destined to the self by the God, but on the passions of the self itself. If the self in Greek tragedy enacted the fate destined by the gods, in the Elizabethan tragedy, the self was directly responsible for its fate. The fate of the self IS determined by the evil¹ it possesses. J.L.Watson notes that though a conception of moral order can be seen in Shakespeare, it "depends less on the supernatural sanctions and backing than on Nature."TM (1983 :49). To give an example, if Oedipus is depicted as experiencing misfortune due to

the fate predicted by the oracle (which is destined by the gods), Macbeth is portrayed as the same fate due to the force of his desire.

Apart from this change in focus towards the present in the character, there is also a change in the plot construction. Auerbach, for example, observes the following difference in plot construction between Greek and Elizabethan Tragedies : Greek tragedy] The essence of [the hero's] personality is revealed and evolves exclusively within the particular tragic action; everything else omitted... [Whereas in Elizabethan course of events on the stage is not rigidly restricted to the course of events of the tragic conflict but covers conversations, scenes, characters, which the action as such does not necessarily require" (1953 : 319).

Critics considered that like Greek Tragedy, in revealing the Elizabethan Tragedy also has a moral purpose. John Dennis, for example, considers that, by showing the characters such as Macbeth getting destroyed "for his lawless ambition and cruelty," tragedy instructs the individuals to follow their moral duty. He observes that "It was the business of tragedy to exhort men to piety and the worship of the gods, to persuade them to justice, to humility, and to fidelity, and to incline to moderation and temperance. And 'tis for the omission of one of these duties that the persons of the modern tragedy [which includes Elizabethan Tragedy] are shown unfortunate in their catastrophies" (in Dukore, 1974 : 368).

REALISM : SELF GOVERNED BY HERIDITV AND ENVIRONMENT

The next phase in Drama is Realism. If the Greek Tragedy and Elizabethan Tragedy showed a belief in an orderly world controlled by the gods (God), the Realists such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg and Arthur Miller focused on a world which is controlled by the laws of nature discovered by science such as the laws of evolution and so on. The characters in Realism, were not noble heroes, but ordinary men. Realism claimed to be dealing objectively¹ (Deer, et al, 1975 : 266) with people in everyday life. The mode of presentation moved from verse (which is seen in Greek Tragedy and Elizabethan Tragedy) to ordinary speech and great importance was given to create a setting that came closest to real life, in an attempt to appear 'natural.'

The plays in Realism too, were tragedies though the self is presented, in them, as the common man. Miller rejects the argument that it is only the tragic actions of noble heroes which are worth presenting on stage and says, "... the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its higher sense as kings were" (in Dukore, 1974 : 894).

The self in Realism, at least as found in Ibsen's Realism, is a product of heredity and For this reason the

fate of the self is determined by these same factors : heridity and environment, and is not govemed by the gods as in Greek Tragedy. The causes of the tragic fate of the self did not lie within the self but outside : in the family and society.

Nora, in A Doll's House by Ibsen, for example, plays the role of a "doll" given to her by her father, husband and society. Though she tries very hard to preserve her marital relationship with her husband by playing a role that he wishes, she soon realizes that a relationship is impossible with a man who sees her just as a doll and not as "human being" (in Deer, 1975 : 219). This realization makes her feel that she is living with a "strange man" (in Deer, etal, 1975 : 219). When this realization dawns on her, she can no more live with a and hence slams the door on him, as well as on her as a doll. She enters into an unknown new reality to see everything, such as her duties,' and'religion' (Ibsen in Deer, etal, 1975 : 217), which made her to take on a particular role (of a doll), afresh, so as to acquire knowledge.

The plays shows that self fulfilment is possible when the self and the society (here husband) transform completely so that their union becomes a 'lrue marriage" (in Deer, et.al., 1975 : 220). But the self in this play, possessed with the new realization about the relation, considers this as greatest miracle of (in Deer, etal., 1975 : 220) and it no more believes in the miracles. Hence it sets out for the search for self fulfilment on its own.

Another play, which shows the self as experiencing misfortune due to the external factors, is the play Ghosts by Ibsen. In this play, Mrs. Alving sends her son Oswald away to Paris, in order to prevent him from inheriting any of his father's sinful (adulterous) life. Oswald goes there to experience the "joy of life" (Ibsen, 1973 : 79), by living in a free society, where there is easy access to both sex and other sensual desires. But he already has, within him, the seeds of the destructive influence of his father in the form of the disease, syphilis. The play says that he was "W>rm-eaten from birth" (Ibsen, 1973 : 73) because "the sins of the father" had "visited the children" (Ibsen, 1973 : 74). The sin of the father was to seek the 'joy of life' through adultery (though secretly). Oswald suffers, both because of this tendency and the effect of this tendency which is syphilis. In this sense his tragedy is fatal. The play thus shows the self seeking the joy of life,' an urge developed due to heridity as well as the due to environment in which it thrives, and thereby getting destroyed by this in this play too goes out seeking the joy of life' and she too is likely to destroy herself (Ibsen, 1973 : 91). The self, in this play, is depicted as indulging in incest and in a greai

many things as a part of this urge for 'joy of without a sense of remorse, contrary to Greek Tragedy, where such an urge was considered punishable.

Thus, it may be noted that though, unlike in Greek Tragedy, the concept of gods as the dispenser of fate is no longer present, yet the concept of fate is preserved in notions such as heredity and environment. The plots of Ibsen's plays were well made. In this way, the predicament of the modem man is strongly presented by Ibsen, so much so, that his themes take on the form of a different kind of tragic myths. Though Ibsen's plays seem to be dealing with specific day to day problems like corruption, women's rights and the destructive of syphilis from parents, showing hendity and environment as determining factors of the fate of the self, Ibsen's mission was not just to bring contemporary problems to light, but, "to awaken the individuals to freedom and independence" (as quoted in Deer, etal., 1975 : 221-2); freedom and independence from the given situations to which the individuals in general are bound.' For example, Nora in A Doll's House can be seen as bountf to the situation/identity of having to play a strange' role (a role not clear to herself). Thus, Ibsen in A Doll's House, by showing Nora slamming the door, intends to awaken individuals to the issue of freedom or independence from this bondage to situation.

Elaborating on this, by giving the example of A Doll's House, the Deers observe that in writing this play was not particularly concerned with women's 'liberation' "...but everyone's right to fulfilment was concerned with a bigger issue – the permanent, universal problem everyone has in trying to find fulfilment" (Deer, etal., 1975:220).

REFERENCES:-

- Appa Rao, P.S.R and P. Sri Rama Shastri. 1967. A MONOGRAPH ON BHARATHA'S NAATYA SAASTRA (INDIAN DRAMATOLOGY). Hyderabad : Natya Maala Publishers.
- Auerbach. 1953. MIMESIS : THE REPRESENTATION OF REALITY IN WESTERN LITERATURE. Trans, Willard R. Trank. 4th pr., 1974, Princeton : Princeton University Press.
- Butcher, S.H. 1968. ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF POETRY AND FINE ART.With a critical text and translation of the poetics. 2nd ed. Ludhiana : Lyall Book Depot.
- Calderwood, James. L and Harold. E. Toliver, ed. 1969. FORMS OF DRAMA. New Jersey : Prentice Hall Inc.

Kakar, Sudhir. 1981. THE INNER WORLD : A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF CHILDHOOD AND SOCIETY IN INDIA. 2nd ed., 1982. London : Oxford University Press.

Kapoor, O.B.L. 1977. THE PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION OF SRI CAITANYA. New Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Narahari Chakravarti. 1992. BHAXTIRATNAKARA (Fifth Wave). Trans. Pundarika Vidyanidhi dasa. Vrindavan : ISKCON.

O'Neill, Eugene. 1921. NINE PLAYS BY EUGENE O'NEILL. Ed and intr., Joseph Wood Krutch. 1954. New York : Random House. Inc.

Raghavan. V. 1975. THE NUMBER OF RASAS. Madras : The Adyar Library.

Tariakar G.H. 1975. STUDIES IN THE NATYA SHASTRA : WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SANSKRIT DRAMA IN PERFORMANCE. 2nd ed., 1991. Delhi : Motilal Banarasidass Publishers

Thielemann, Selina. 1998. A MUSICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS DRAMA IN VRAJA. New Delhi : APH Publishing Corporation.

Wulff, Donna M. 1977. DRAMA AS A MODE OF RELIGIOUS REALIZATION : VIDAGDHA MADHAVAOF RUPA GOSWAMI. Manuscript of Ph.D dissertation submitted to Harvard University (Published in 1984. California : Scholars Press).