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Portrayal of Women as Victims of Social Norms: A Study of Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*

Abstract:

Badal Sircar is one of the greatest playwrights of modern Indian theatre. His play, *Evam Indrajit* is considered to be one of the milestone plays of Indian drama. The issues raised in *Evam Indrajit* are vital and hold relevance even in the current scenario of Indian society. This play aims at social change and to achieve that, emancipation of women is one of the most necessary things as hinted by the playwright. In his play *Evam Indrajit*, Sircar exposes the brutal reality of Indian society where women hold a secondary position to men and are bound by many societal norms. There are two women characters, Auntie and Manasi, who appear in the play while the others are referred to only. This research paper focuses on the discrimination the women characters go through in the play and also the playwright's brave attempt to portray and condemn the pitiable conditions of women in Indian society.

Keywords: Discrimination, Victim, Social Norms, Submission

Introduction:

Badal Sircar is one of the greatest writers of modern Indian drama. His play, *Evam Indrajit* is considered to be a milestone play of modern Indian drama and it is also termed as "the *Waiting for Godot* of the Bengali theater" (Bharucha 133) because of the presence of some

absurd elements in the play. Although the play was written in 1963, the issues raised in the play are still relevant to the current scenario of society, especially the perception of women in today's society. There are two women characters that appear in the play while the rest are only referred to. In *Evam Indrajit*, Sircar throws light on the pitiable condition of women and also condemns it through the angst of the protagonist, Indrajit, against society.

Discussion:

The first character to be introduced in *Evam Indrajit* is Auntie. Auntie was a mother figure to most of the male characters in the play. As a woman she was conditioned by her society to assign herself the job of looking after her family. Most of the times the male characters in the play tended to either pay no heed to or ignore her words completely which made it evident that she was taken for granted in the house. Though she was a senior member of the household yet she held no authoritative position in the house. She had to accept her position the way it was for she could not do anything to bring about a change in the attitude of the men towards her. Often she expressed her naivety about not knowing much about things, especially intellectual aspects, thus giving the license to the male members to think trivially of her and not valuing her contribution towards the household.

The next character to be introduced in the play is Manasi. Manasi was a well educated urban woman. She was a school teacher and was financially independent. Despite having achieved financial independence she still cares about rules imposed by society on women and abides by them. It is because of this reason that she couldn't marry Indrajit, the protagonist of the play. Manasi and Indrajit were both matured individuals and understood each other well. They both wanted to be there for each other but what came as a barrier to their union was the condition set by society on their relationship. Manasi was Indrajit's first cousin from his mother's side. Though they had great mental compatibility, their relationship would be seen as a social taboo. Their case would have been considered as incest by their respective families and the whole society who are products of the same mindset. Indrajit, somehow knew that he being a man, his patriarchal society would forgive him for his act of marrying Manasi and that's why he was so keen on marrying her by defying the rules of society. But for Manasi the case was different. Manasi knew she could never find acceptance in society if a marital union takes place between her and Indrajit. She knew she would be looked down upon for her sinful act. This fear of humiliation led Manasi to reject Indrajit's proposal of marriage. An astonishing fact that can be

found here is that even for personal decisions like marriage women had to rely on the conditions laid down by society. It was society's approval that mattered in a woman's life than the individual choice of an independent woman. Men had the liberty to take decisions based on their personal choices because their individualities were given more importance to, whereas women continued to remain in shadow of society which was male-dominated. This discrimination continues till this day and women continue to suffer silently beneath a submissive exterior. Like most women of her time, Manasi too, succumbed to the baseless and discriminatory societal norms. She showed great amount of restraint in this relationship. Anjum Katyal said in this regard "her quiet resigned acceptance of a woman's lot is as old as the Ramayana. This is an image, a construct, of woman that has persisted in the popular imagination: the long suffering, self-sacrificing figure who never rebels against an unfair society but resolutely fulfils the role expected of her. She is meant to be a figure of admiration" (Katyal 197). Manasi and other women belonging to the same society should be admired for their sacrifices to make social norms their priority. As a matter of fact, they do not have the voice to demand for their rights. In the case of Manasi, "She did not give in to the temptation to get married to a man she loved the most but exercised an adequate amount of self-restraint to give more priority to the code of conduct that women were bound to abide by..." ("Independence Disguised as Submission" 365)

Both the women characters, Auntie and Manasi are introduced in the play in the very beginning of the play. The play opens with Auntie telling the Writer, a main character in the play, who tries to find the right material to formulate the plot of his play, "I just can't understand you" (*Evam* 3). This statement was given in response to the Writer's ignorance of her repeated calls for having his meal on time. Auntie is unable to understand what kept the Writer so preoccupied which does not let him have his meals on time. This time also the Writer, as usual, ignored her call and Auntie became irritated at his gesture and left the place grumbling, "Do what you want. Night and day scribble, scribble, scribble. No food, no drink, just scribble. Only God knows what will come out of all this scribbling..." (*Evam* 3). Here is a clear indication of a woman failing to understand the job of writing as if it was a man's domain. Satyadev Dubey says in this regard "...The mother, eternal and typical keeps popping in to deliver her homilies. There is a totally bewildered incomprehension on her part of The Writer's need to write at the cost of neglecting important human functions like eating and sleeping." (*Evam* Introduction vii). Auntie has been seen as a stereotypical woman quite distanced from the intellectual and creative fields.

Her only job was to take care of domestic chores which included looking after the male members of the family. When the Writer on one occasion tried to explain something to Auntie she retorted back saying, “Who wants your logic?” (*Evam* 35). This is in vein with what Mary Wollstonecraft said in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) about women being considered as irrational beings devoid of reason in society. Manasi, on the other hand, becomes a source of inspiration to the Writer and time and again keeps enquiring about the progress he has made on his playwriting. Manasi even gives valuable suggestions to the Writer asking him to draw inspiration from real people and write about them instead of completely relying on his imaginary capabilities. Auntie and Manasi are projected as completely opposite personalities in the play. Manasi took interest in creative pursuits, whereas Auntie neither understood anything about it nor was interested in it. But what’s common between both these women is that both were victims of social norms and submitted themselves to the unreasonable demands of society. Though Manasi was aware of the rules that governed her existence she still followed those religiously whereas for Auntie following societal rules and regulations came naturally to her.

Apart from these women, another woman has been referred to in the play. This woman named Leela was an acquaintance of Indrajit and Manasi. Leela lost her husband due to TB. After that incident, Leela’s in-laws kept her in their house for a few days, took all the Provident Fund and insurance money, and even her ornaments. Then they threw her out of the house. (*Evam* 22) Indrajit was narrating Leela’s incident to Manasi in order to highlight the plight of women in society. Women were considered as playthings who could be devalued any moment; their emotions can be played with and their individual identities disrespected.

The play shows Manasi appearing in other roles too, as Amal’s wife and even as Indrajit’s wife. Auntie too appeared as a mother figure to most of the male characters of the play though there is no clear evidence of the male characters being related to each other in the play. This shows how female characters were not given individual identities. These women derived their sense of identities from the men they were associated with. Before marriage it is usually the father’s identity that a girl carries and after marriage it is the husband’s identity. Society in an urge to control women doesn’t wish to give them their own identities. Since times immemorial women have been portrayed as victim figures in arts and literature which are real representations of contemporary society. It still continues as the societal system demands that women submit themselves to society and let men lead the way. Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the*

Rights of Woman has recognized society's role in the suppression of women. Pramod K. Nayar has accurately put together Wollstonecraft's ideas in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. He says:

“the characteristics one associates with the feminine in women are socially given values, and the woman assimilates these values so that she fits into the category of the feminine...Wollstonecraft was thus one of the pioneers who moved away from a biological view of gender to a social one where she saw social norms, values, laws and cultural practices as demanding, imposing and recommending particular forms of behaviour from women” (85-86). Women are made to feel inferior and secondary to men. They are made to believe that it is their natural role to keep their own interests below the interests of the male members of their families. These women had no right to defy the laws of society. In the play, Manasi follows these rules because she feels “Girls have to” (*Evam* 21). This is the brutal reality Sircar has portrayed through this play. The condemnation of it can be found in Indrajit's questioning and raising his voice against these things.

Sircar's protest against social discrimination against women comes with the angst of Indrajit that is expressed in the words “Girls must follow the rules. Men can do what they like, but women must be obedient.” (*Evam* 21). The playwright, being a firm believer in the concept of equality demanded equal rights for women too by exposing the bitter truth of societal norms on women and did not hesitate to express his “Anger against rules” (*Evam* 23). Wollstonecraft had in her book attacked the prejudices of the male-dominated society against women. She said “such deeply rooted prejudices have clouded reason, and such spurious qualities have assumed the name of virtues...” She also feels “Men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they can scarcely trace how, rather than to root them out.” This is a fact that finds relevance even today, so many decades after the play has been written. But what's interesting is that Badal Sircar, despite being a male writer, did not shy away from addressing the issue of the contemporary society's treatment of women. He showed up the courage to expose the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society and in doing so he joins the bandwagon of writers who have championed women's rights through their works.

Conclusion:

Evam Indrajit is a revolutionary play in the history of modern Indian drama. Among the many vital issues about modern man, women's position and plight in society, too, has been a

major highlight of the play. The playwright has made an effort to accurately portray the discriminatory nature of society against women which compels them into submitting themselves without questioning the basis of norms imposed on them. The victimization of women is still very much a part of social codes and the playwright's attempt to express it through his art to create awareness among people so that a change in the mindset of people can be brought in, is something that should be considered as worthy of appreciation.

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