

THE THEME OF WOMEN EXPLOITATION IN PARTAP SHARMA'S PLAY A TOUCH OF BRIGHTNESS

**Dr. N. Anil Krishna ,Associate Professor, Osmania University College for Women,
Koti, Hyderabad**

ABSTRACT

Partap Sharma is a dramatist of strong convictions and social commitment and exposes the naked truth. A Touch of Brightness⁴ is “ a picture of red light district of Bombay”⁵. The play shows how social forces compel an innocent girl to take up prostitution. A Touch of Brightness (1964) was banned in Bombay till 1972 as the play is set “ in one of the most famous localities of Bombay City” and it allegedly deals with “ matters which it is highly undesirable to show on the stage”. The ban on the play was revoked in 1972. To date five plays of Partap Sharma have been published. They are A Touch of Brightness (1965), The Professor Has a War cry, (1970), Bangla Desh(1971), Power Play (1980), Queen Bee (1981). His unpublished plays include Bars Invisible (1961), The Word (1966), Echoes from Aunt's Booze Joint. The dramatic output of Partap Sharma bears testimony to his unceasing interest in contemporary themes. Partap Sharma like Girish Karnad and Nissim Ezekiel dramatizes the complex social life. But the characters of Partap Sharma's plays, unlike those of Girish Karnad and Nissim Ezekiel, are more rebellious. His play A Touch of Brightness was initially banned for performance by the government because “The play has for its background the red light area of Bombay.”¹ His plays are based on “recognizable social reality” uncovering an “aspect of truth.”² For Partap Sharma the function of the dramatic art is not just to enthrall the audience but to make “more coherent and comprehensible the bewildering complexity of the world.”³ His plays are anti-establishment.

Playwright, Commentator and film-maker Partap Sharma was born on December 12, 1939. He has a penchant for chess, riding, fishing, archery and karate. He had his B.A. Honours degree from the St. Xavier's College, Bombay in 1959. Partap Sharma's published writings includes The Surangini Tales (a book of fables), Do a Detective Ranjha, The Little Master of the Elephant, Top Dog, Days of the Turban (a novel). He is also a documentary film maker. His first documentary “ The Framework of Famine” (1967) is an investigation of how nature's devastation is compounded by human corruption and inefficiency. The documentary was banned for its “ruthless candour” and subsequently released after other documentary-makers protested. The Flickering Flame,” a documentary made in 1974, portrays the mismanagement of the energy crisis and its effect on the suburban house wife. It was banned and never released. His other documentary, “ Kamli” (1979) , depicts the status of woman in rural Indian society”.

“Viewpoint Amritsar” (1984), a film about the Golden Temple and environs in the aftermath of Operation Bluestar, is co-directed by Partap Sharma and V.V Chandra. Partap Sharma also directed a children's film “ The Case of the hidden ear-Ring,” of 15 minutes duration. His efforts in the production of “ The British Raj Through Indian Eyes” a documentary series for Channel Four Television, U.K., won acclaim. Partap Sharma is also known as a film actor. He played lead role in the film “ PhirBhi” (1971) which won the President of India's National Award. He also acted in “ Andolan” (1975), “ TyaagPatra” (1980), “ PhelaKadam” (1980). Partap Sharma played the central role of Jawaharlal Nehru, covering various stages of his life, in the film “ Nehru- The Jewel of India” (1989). He also directed an audio-visual in 1982 on the subject of Karate titled “ The Empty Hand,” along with Burge Cooper (3Dan Black Belt) suing 7 Dan Black Belt Shihan Morio Higaonne of Okinawa. “ The Empty Hand” won an award as one of the best audio-visual of 1982. He is also associated with the Indian National Theatre, Bombay, as playwright and director of English drama from 1960. Partap Sharma is a leading commentator for

newsreels and documentaries produced by Films Divisions (Bombay). He narrated most of the Son- et- lumiereprogrammes produced in India.

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A Touch of Brightness⁴ is " a picture of redlight district of Bombay"⁵. The play shows how social forces compel an innocent girl to take up prostitution. A Touch of Brightness (1964) was banned in Bombay till 1972 as the play is set " in one of the most famous localities of Bombay City"⁶ and it allegedly deals with " matters which it is highly undesirable to show on the stage"⁷ But Partap Sharma opines that the ban on A Touch of Brightness is absurd. He candidly puts forth his views:

A dramatic work based on recognizable social reality is often harder to take than the social reality by itself; for art does more than present a casual point of view, it communicates an Experience of concentrated intensity. This is how I have tried to excuse those who attacked me for having written the play⁸.

Partap Sharma is a dramatist of strong convictions and social commitment and exposes the naked truth. Hence his works have always roused controversy. In spite of the ban on A Touch of Brightness, Partap Sharma refused to recast the play and pointed out that the " play stands as it is and for what it is and for no more"⁹. His uncompromising nature is revealed in his comment:

... I cannot rework reality to suit to the required standard of complacency. I feel even more sorry that complacency cannot rework reality. I prefer to believe, as did Henrik Ibsen, that " to be a poet means essentially to see, but mark well, to see in such a way that whatever is seen is perceived by the audience just as the poet saw it"¹⁰.

The ban on the play was revoked in 1972. The character of Bensari Baba, a women trader, is introduced in the beginning of the play. Pidku, the adopted son of Bensari Baba, meets Prema, daughter of a devadasi, on the pavement of red light district of Bombay. Prema lands herself in Bombay with just " four annas left" . Pidku request his surrogate father to help Prema. Prema is ready to do some " something in service of God." She desperately says:

But nobody will give me a job. And I'm not trained for anything. I can read and write. (the old man spits in contempt but she continues). really, I often used to read from the Gita, The Ramayana, and the Mahabharata. I can sing devotional songs, I can dance. But nobody will give me a job. I tried very hard in Mysore (p.9).

Bensari Baba paradoxically says that Prema in order " to serve god" should first " serve men." Bensari Baba believes that " convenience is God" and asks Prema to join the

prostitution house run by Bhabi Rani. But Prema protests. Bensari Baba takes the help of police constable, Bedekar and succeeds in landing Prema in Bhabi Rani's cage. In scene ii Bhabi Rani changes Prema's name to Rukmini. Pidku unsuccessfully makes attempts to bail Rukmini out of the situation. However, He is bent on securing the release of Prema from the clutches of Bhabi Rani. He is shocked at his father's act of selling Prema to Bhabi Rani for four hundred and fifty rupees:

Four hundred and fifty- By Baba? Baba?
Oh no (p.32)

He says to Bhabi Rani in anguish:

No! I'm taking her with me. (He catches her hand. She hesitates) (p.32).

Irritated Bhabi Rani orders Pidku to leave her place:

Don't you dare! If you want the girl you Can buy her back. Give me my four fifty. You can take her to hell for all I care. But till I get my money, she shall be called Rukmini. Do you understand (p.32).

Pidku replies:

I'll get it. I'll get your four hundred and fifty (p.32).

Pidku leaves the stage. The attempts of Pidku to earn four hundred and fifty, for the release of Prema, continue. Meanwhile, Rukmini, that is Prema, comes in contact with Bharatendra. Shri Bharatendra, one time sanyasi, is a self proclaimed quack. He owns an unregistered pharmaceutical factory. A regular visitor to Bhabi Rani's "cage" he is infatuated by "Rukmini. He says to Rukmini:

Guru! (Laughs) I am your slave, your pupil.
You are my tutor. You have more strength
of mind (p.51).

Rukmini loved Shri Bharatendra reading from an "exquisitive" book. In scene v Bharatendra proposes to marry Rukmini.

But she says "what is the hurry?". " Shri Bharatendra explains:

There's been some trouble with my business. I can't tell you about it-it's too complicated. Anyway it wouldn't interest a women (p.62)

Rukmini suggests that Bharatendra can marry some other "women of the world." Shri Bharatendra persists that rukmini is his only choice. Rukmini comes out with the truth that she is the daughter of a Devadasi and cannot marry. She confesses that "she is bearing another man's child. She explains to him as to how she was first duped by a young salesman:

The first step to Brahma is purification of the heart. And I do it by telling you the truth. In the city of Mysore, a young man came to the spot where I stood and poured a rain of coins in my hand.

Despite her confession Shri Bharatendra is willing to marry her and says:

I love you. I suppose I could take the child too and bring it up as my own. There is more to you than just flesh. Your mind is like a fire-fly in a dark wood. It is impossible to leave you (p.69).

But Rukmini says that it is impossible for her "to leave the course" on which she is set. She says:

And this (Looking about her) is my destiny. It is ordained by my cast. And I return to it. My mother could not prevent it. Nor can you my guru, by marrying me. You would only leave me and I would have lost precious time (p.69).

Bharatendra tries to persuade her to marry him in vain. Meanwhile Bharatendra's illegal factory is sealed by police. Pidku working in the factory is arrested and sent to the " Juvenile home." Benarsi Baba considers Bharatendra responsible for his son's imprisonment.

Scene vi portrays the pathetic life of the women "caged" in the red light district of Bombay. The "caged" women Rukmini, Basanthi, Vastsala and Sureksha are illtreated by Bhabi Rani, the head of the "house 77." Bhabi Rani is irritated to know that Rukmini is pregnant. She curses her:

It's your evil karma that has brought disaster, you witch. It is your temple – talk and your devilry. If someone would take you free I would not ask for money. And what shall I do—now that you are with child? Shall I feed if after you're gone?

Pidku, released from the “reform school”, came to meet Rukmini in Bhabhi Rani’s house. He brings four hundred and fifty rupees to secure the release of Rukmini from Bhabhi Rani. Surprised Bhabhi Rani asks Pidku:

Where did you get all that? (p.82).

He says that he “worked for it.” Pidku explains:

I used to play chess with the warden. We got quite friendly. They were good to me. They taught me to use my hands. See! (Her holds up a wooden toy).

... ..

Hundreds like it. And, bhabhi, you needn’t look so serious. I could sell them too. Here’s something that will please you (p.82)

He takes out a roll of currency notes from his pockets and gives to Bhabhi Rani. Bhabhi Rani asks Pidku to take Rukmini away from her house. But she resists again because Benarsi Baba had warned her not to entangle Pidku in Rukmini’s affair.

Pidku does not brook anybody’s intervention:

What has he to do with me or with any of you? (p.83).

Sensing that Rukmini is ill, Pidku asks Bhabhi Rani to return his amount so that he can take the pregnant Rukmini to a doctor. He assures Bhabhi Rani that he would return the money later. Money- minded Bhabhi Rani rejects to give the money and curses them:

The money. There is no oil in the stove, Pidku, there is no food. Your Baba has brought this on us. And your sister has diseased this house. she has ruined me. You’ve caused all our misery (p.85)

In the following scuffle, Bhabhi Rani slaps Pidku on his face and calls him a thief. Pidku runs away from the place.

In scene vii Dr. Dariwall treats Rukmini in Bhabhi Rani’s house. The doctor informs Bhabhi Rani that Rukmini is “unconscious.” He says:

... The child is far too premature. It may take her too (p.90)

Shri Bharatendra also comes to Bhabhi Rani’s Place “to find shelter,” But Bhabhi Rani asks him to leave as Bensari Baba is likely to attack him:

Imagine him walking up to any man on a night like this! Heaven knows what Bensari is planning. You shouldn’t have come back Fortune Road. It’s dangerous (p.88).

But Bharatendra is concerned about the ill-health of Rukmini:

She’s like a ... whirlpool. I was pulled back. But had I known her condition... had I known her condition... God, what shall I do? It’s all so hopeless. If Benarsi finds me here.... (p.88).

Meanwhile Benarsi Baba comes with goonds. He ‘thrusts some money’ in the hands of Dr. Dariwalla and plans the death of Rukmini. He also kills Shri Bharatendra with the help of goonda and constable Bedekar. Pidku enters the scene and comes to know the death of Rukmini.

In scene viii he finds his surrogate father responsible for the murder of Rukmini. He bids good-bye to his father. Bensari Baba pleads Pidku not to leave:

Come back, Pidku, come back. Don’t leave me alone, my son, those people are well-dressed rogues, that’s all. Don’t mix with them. Pidku! Don’t leave me alone. My son!

But Pidku is shown “walking through the auditorium, down the aisle, past the seated audience.”

Both Shri Bharatendra and Pidku in the play are genuinely interested in liberating Prema(Rukmini) from the wretched profession. Conditioned by her social stigma, Prema refuses to marry Shri Bharatendra. Pidku's efforts also fail because of the hostile social attitudes towards the prostitutes. Partap Sharma suggests that in the present society, the fate of a devadasi is sealed forever. He castigates the society for the despicable tragedy of devadasies and prostitutes.

Through *A Touch of Brightness* is commended for the thematic boldness, it is criticized for its "attempt to dish our sensational superficialities to titillate a foreign taste"¹¹M.K.Naik comments:

Slum, brothel and official corruption; a temple dancer gone astray and a fake sadhu who at once quotes (or to be exact, misquotes) the Gayatri Mantra, and concocts spurious drugs for venereal Diseases- here is a typical mixture of garish Colors for western audiences fed on shows like *Oh, Calcutta*.¹²

But it is unfair to level the charge of "Sensationalism" on the play because the play tries only to project the harsh social reality. It acquires credibility for its "vivid evocation of the Bombay slums, the prostitutes in their cages, the beggars sleeping under the street lamps, the sense of the cheapness of life."¹³ Referring to his own quality of writing which is "sharp, direct, at times lyrical," Partap Sharma comments :

One was projected into a world whose values were entirely different from, indeed opposed to, one's own in such a way that imaginatively one was altogether compelled to accept its reality¹⁴

The beginning and the ending of *A Touch of Brightness* has symbolic overtones. The play begins with offstage voice performing the function of chorus. The voices refer to the hardships of the people living in the red light district of the Bombay. The red light district as suggested by voice 1 is a cage "with nowhere to go" and which has no name "no one claims." Voice 1 says:

This is road with nowhere to go a road that no one claims; this is where we have come to be free by walking about in our chains. This is a road for a wandering whore a road that has no name; but come and see and you'll agree we dwell in house of fame (p.1)

Voices communicate the agony of the "caged" girls. Voices provide an overall comment on this play. Voice 1 further says;

This is a road where everyone gives a road where no one gains;The seller will loseThe buyer will lose and both will profit in shame (p.2)

This is a road with nowhere to go a road where nothing is known;
Aiyeseeth, aiyejee come, sir, see (p.2)

The last two lines of the voice 3 are replete with irony.

The ending of the play has symbolic overtones. Partap Sharma ends the play on a rebellious note with Pidku leaving the auditorium without paying heed to his father's request. Pidku's action establishes the playwright's belief that things cannot be set right in this rule bound society.

The title of the play is drawn from Wen Yi-Tuo's poem "Dead Water". Partap Sharma explains:

The only thing I wish to explain or justify is the title, and that was arrived at when I read the following stanza in the poem "Dead Water" by Wen Yi-Tue:

So this ditch of dead and hopeless water may boast a touch of brightness.
If the toads cannot endure the deathly silence,
The water may burst out singing.¹⁵

The poem of Wen Yi-Tuo provokes Partap Sharma's search for that "redeeming touch of brightness" in the play. In the dark and dismal world of prostitutes, the characters Pidku and Shri Bharatendra offer "a touch of brightness."

References

¹Partap Sharma, "Author's Note, " **A Touch of Brightness** (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1973).

²Partap Sharma himself expressed this view in his letter (26th October, 1990) to the researcher

³Partap Sharma gave this information in his letter dated 26th October, 1990 addressed to the researcher.

⁴Partap Sharma, **A Touch of Brightness**(Bombay : Orient Longman Limited, 1973). All subsequent reference with page numbers in parentheses in this part (II) are to this edition.

⁵M.K.Naik, " The Ashoka Pillar: Independence and After, " *A History of Indian English literature* (Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1982) 261.

⁶Partap Sharma, " Author's Note, " **A Touch of Brightness**

⁷Partap Sharma, " Author's Note, " **A Touch of Brightness**

⁸Partap Sharma, "Author's Note, " **A Touch of Brightness**

⁹Partap Sharma, "Author's Note, " **A Touch of Brightness**

¹⁰Partap Sharma, "Author's Note, " **A Touch of Brightness**

¹¹ M.K Naik " The Ashok Pillar: Independence and After, " *A History of Indian English Literature* (Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1982) 261.

¹² M.K Naik, 261

¹³Rajender Paul " Partap Sharma Interviewed", *Enact* 46 (October 1970) 2

¹⁴Rajender Paul " Partap Sharma Interviewed," *Enact* 46 (October 1970) 2

¹⁵"Authors Note," *A Touch of Brightness* .