

Dissecting Socio-Cultural Fantasy Of Inferiority Of Women in Alekar's Play Begum Barve

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Abstract:

The present research paper is an attempt to dissect and analyze a fantasy of inferiority of women in Alekar's play Begum Barve through feminist lens by deploying exploratory and analytical methodologies. Society is an eco-politico-cultural system based on certain ideologies. It is patriarchal which functions to inculcate a hierarchy through variety of covert means – biology, politics and social system particularly family-entrench social and political inequality in a private sphere. Biologically, she is thought to be production being (factory), politically, she has less representation and socially, she is only 'other' to him. She is marginalized, victimized and ostracized. It discards her existence and identity. Only she has her identity in association with him as daughter, sister or wife. It means she is inferior, where she is right from girlhood to old age is made to believe that she is incomplete and he is complete, however, her inferiority is mere socio-cultural fantasy. She is neither biologically, economically, politically or socially (part of family and society) unequal to him. Similar phenomenon is reinforced in Satish Alekar's play Begum Berve. Barve, a small-time female impersonator in sangeet natak theatre and now an incense stick seller, fantasizes himself as a female impersonator under a nostalgic effect of sangeet natak. He (she) marries Shyamrao and behaves like his wife but he (she) is sexually, economically and physically exploited. He is also looked as a sex object by Jawdekar and Bawdekar. He is humiliated, exploited and marginalized however, his role in family and society is far better than three male characters.

Key words: woman, patriarchy, society, fantasy, ideology.

Patriarchy is a socio-eco-political system that establishes a hierarchy of men and discards a position and an identity of women. Kate Millett argues:

Patriarchal society works to inculcate male supremacy through a variety of covert means: politically, women have negligible representation, the biological sciences legitimize chauvinistic beliefs in female inferiority, and social systems-particularly the family-entrench political and social inequality in the private sphere.

(Wagh, 326)

It assumes that humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. Since the female is not male, she becomes the other, an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the male, the dominant being in society. Millett asserts that 'a female is born and a woman is created. One's sex, be that male or female, is determined at birth. One's gender, however, is a social construct created by cultural ideal and norms. Always subordinate to the male, the female finds herself a secondary or non-existent player in the major institutions of cultures.' (Bressler, 147) The reflection of patriarchal system is visible in all spheres of life. The *sangeet natak* tradition is also profoundly influenced by it. The *sangeet natak* is a distinctive feature of Marathi play. It came into existence around the 1850 and evolved in the form of touring theatrical groups. It has a place to dominant practices of female impersonation. As pointed out by Bhardikar, 'This theatre was a homosexual space that nurtured the practice of female impersonator.' (Inamdar-Sane, 10) The practices continue even after the emergence of mixed and all-woman companies however, it has been adversely hampered and has gone and influenced negatively in some female impersonators' lives.

Satish Alekar has set the plot of the present play in the patriarchal structure of society. It mainly revolves around the central protagonist called Barve. He was a small-time female impersonator and used to play the role as minor female characters in the *sangeet natkas*/musical plays but he has possessed a desire to enact as major female characters that often throws him in nostalgic memories and out of it he has woven the fantasy. He initiates to treat himself as a woman. The moments, he treats himself to be so; he slips himself to victimization of patriarchal system. The society is based on false conscious notion that man is superior to woman. He is at centre and she is just 'other.' She is biologically and intellectually unequal and has no equal ability in comparison of him. She has her identity in association with him; otherwise, she is an alien entity. Such ideological thinking of an andro-centric society favours a masculine section and discards the very existence and recognition of feminine section of the society. She is considered and marginalized in all spheres of life. Similarly, Barve, representative of 'little men, marginalized men' as Bandopadhyay claims, undergoes various stages of subjugation in his life throughout the play. He (she) sells the incense sticks to earn living of own self and Shyamrao who sexually and financially exploits him (her). Barve is a sex object for him similar to the minor female impersonators for *sangeet natak mandali* owners. Here, the irrationality and the illogical nature of thinking of society is exhibited and exposed that creates a query in any rational brain 'Why is woman treated as a sex object and not like any other man?' The reply is that it is an absurdity created by mankind that compels to think so. He (she) weaves fantasy to escape from and produces a defense mechanism against his (her) present agonies of unfulfilled desires, poverty and exploitation at the hands of Shyamrao. The two clerks—Jawdekar and Bawdekar living a life filled with anxieties, voids and yearnings come across Barve and enter in Barve's fantasy assuming him (her) to be Nalawadebai. They unite in the bond of marriage. The course progresses to a pregnancy of Barve and the celebration of the seventh-month of pregnancy. This fantasy collapses when Shyamrao exposes Barve in the most brutal manner removing his *dhoti* and making him (her) appear in underpant.

Alekar has dexterously presented a contemporary social panorama of marriage and life after it. The patriarchal ideology scrupulously works to compel woman to think that marriage can ascertain her respectable position and can save her from daily anxieties, worries and agonies. However, it has proven to be a false notion with Barve who has been revictimized, remarginalized and reostracized after his (her) marriage. He (she) is just seen as an object of a misogynistic presumption of female passivity to fulfill masculine sexuality by Jawdekar and Bawdekar. It has not even secured a domestic place but has shackled him (her) to the two men. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir has asserted:

Marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement, which reinforces sexual inequality and binds women to domesticity. (Wagh, 321)

She has rightly exposed and pointed out the hidden agenda of patriarchy and vacuum in marriage system which can be seen in the life of Barve as the wife of Jawdekar. The fulfillment of human potential must be judged, not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty. Liberty is something more than maintaining one's existence peacefully and comfortably: to be free, a person must transcend the animal part of his or her life—the temporary and unthinking happiness that comes from being warm and well fed—and pursue the uniquely human desire to know more, do more and have more. Barve is denied all these due to an assumption of womanhood. Woman is left alone to tolerate when she actually requires support from man as Barve has been forsaken and eschewed by all other characters in the final scene when Shyamrao abuses, humiliates and excruciatingly tortures him (her). Once Barve pathetically appeals:

Don't pollute your tongue, Shyamrao, by saying anything further.

It was only to gain merit that I allowed a Shishupal like you to

even come close to me. Was it for this that I served you with my heart and soul? Tell me, is this how my core is to be repaid? (Alekar, 319)

It seems that a definitive reality of womanhood is to undergo humiliation, torture and marginalization that cause sorrow, pain and despair. In fact, probing deep into patriarchal system to explore its ideological agenda one can easily cope up and understand that it is basically set on meaningless, illogical, irrational and hence absurd idea that man is superior to woman, he is 'I' and she is 'other'. In reality, the society is built up of men and women. They are like two wheels of a vehicle. As a vehicle cannot move further without both wheels, it is an unimaginable notion to run society smoothly without an equal participation of woman. She ought to be given equal status. As far Barve is concerned, he (she) supports all male characters whether it is Shyamrao in his pathetic life as Jawdekar and Bawdekar in their dowdy, monotonous and insecure life. It is only Barve who bestows a shower of peace, tranquility and happiness in others' harsh and sun baked lives. Barve's role and significance as a woman is rightly described in his dialogue:

... Light our true blue sandalwood incense stick and feel free to tuck it into its brass holder. The poor thing will burn away in style. With nary a whine nor a whimper. No protest, no complaint, it will quietly burn away, to make the home cosy with its fragment ash, to bring divinity to God and happiness to the company owner... (Alekar, 305)

The incense stick does not remain to an inflated object offered to God, now it represents not only Barve in his female impersonator but also all exploited women whose work goes unheeded and self-sacrifice is taken for granted. Since she is a woman, built up of Adam's bone and flesh and so she is taken out of him and is shadow of him as it has been mentioned in the Christian scripture. They squander their whole lives for others without grudge. Barve earns a living for own self and Shyamrao who inhumanly behaves with Barve yet he (she) has no complaint against him ever that exactly matches to woman section of the society of which he (she) imagines own self to be the member. In addition to this, the Marathi word for incense stick is *Udbatti*. It is by gender a feminine. The image reflects and constitutes an identity and very existence of individual. *Udbatti*-incense stick stands for self scarification. It reinforces light on the fact that Barve stands for more perfect personality than other characters. In this regard, Juliet Mitchell has strongly acknowledged, 'This is social and cultural fantasy where the woman is, right from girlhood, made to believe the male is complete and she is not.' (Nayar, 104) Therefore, it is obvious that social and cultural norms discriminate man and woman as superior and inferior, otherwise, there is no difference. So Mitchell has rightly explored the absurdity embedded in the patriarchal structure of the society.

To conclude, woman as an inferior individual to man is mere socio-cultural fantasy. It is a patriarchal ideology that differentiates the two to create hegemony of the male section. In fact, there is no difference between man and woman except sex.

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