

Depiction of Moral Degradation of Everyman Through Fantasy in Elkunchwar's "Reflection"

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Abstract

Fantasy has been an interesting tool in the hands of the writers of both past and present. Earlier, myths, legends, magic or magical and supernatural elements had been major ingredients of the works of ancient writers. However, the characteristics and nature of the fantasy used in modern plays have been very distinguished from the ancient and orthodox drama. In these plays, fantasy has not been given the traditional part to play as we find in the old drama to create horror or supernatural magical effect. Fantasy has been used with a specific purpose so as to suit the nature of the play. In the history of Indian theatre, Elkunchwar especially have used fantasy in the fashion of Ionesco and Albee. It is a conspicuously-visible-feature in his play, "Reflection". As Bandyopadhyay puts it in his Introduction, "'Reflection' is surreal in the space it creates between the palpable and the impalpable."(Alekar.xxv) The magical or fantastical part has been so skillfully and flawlessly internalized in the plot of the play by Elkunchwar that it seems to be an integral part of the play. So, an attempt will be made here to critically evaluate the fantastic use of reflection to depict the moral degradation of the modern man. It will also attempt to reveal the meaning of the fantastic images and situations that color the play and the symbolic significance behind the same.

Keywords: Loss of Reflection, Window of the Mind, Flags's Cock-image, Girl without Reflection, Dark Humour.

Fantasy is not a novel concept or tool in literature. Since the medieval times to modern, fantasy has been one of the greatest and the most availed tools in the hands of the writers who didn't want to trudge the 'trodden path'. "The fantasy genre is predominantly of

the medieval form. In its broadest sense, however, fantasy comprises works by many writers, artists, filmmakers and musicians from ancient myths and legends to many recent and popular.”(Wikipedia) Earlier, myths, legends, magic or magical and supernatural elements had been major ingredients of the works of ancient writers. However, the characteristics and nature of the fantasy used in modern plays have been very distinguished from the ancient and orthodox drama. In these plays, fantasy has not been given the traditional part to play as we find in the old drama to create horror or supernatural magical effect. Fantasy has been used with a specific purpose so as to suit the nature of the play. In a fantastic work, magic or supernatural element is used as a main plot, theme or setting. This trait of fantastic work makes it distinguished from other genres like science fiction. In modern Absurd or Surrealistic drama, the use of fantasy has been one of the chief ingredients with a specific purpose. In all the chief Absurd dramatists, this feature is traceable in their plays. The modern Indian drama that began in eighteenth and nineteenth century in imitation of the western drama did not show any great use of fantasy in plays. However, with independence, there emerged such playwrights like Mahesh Elkunchwar and Satish Alekar who brought fantasy to the best of its unique use for the first time in the history of Indian drama. Elkunchwar especially have used fantasy in the fashion of Ionesco and Albee. It is a conspicuously-visible-feature in his play, “Reflection”. As Bandyopadhyay puts it in his Introduction, “‘Reflection’ is surreal in the space it creates between the palpable and the impalpable.”(Alekar.xxv) This surrealism is achieved by the author through a dexterous use of the fantastic characters and situations. It is quite unprecedented on Indian stage to use fantastic situations, images and characters in order to portray the futility and meaninglessness of human life and moral degradation of the modern materialistic man, such as had been done in Reflection by Elkunchwar. Such symbolic use of fantasy is we find only in plays of Becket and Ionesco.

This paper thus attempts to critically evaluate the fantastic use of reflection to depict the moral degradation of the modern man. It will also attempt to reveal the meaning of the fantastic images and situations that color the play and the symbolic significance behind the fantastic images that have been created by the author.

Loss of Reflection

The protagonist, who is not bestowed even the favour of a name and called by other characters as Blockhead, is a stereotypical specimen representing the materialistic modern man.

He can be said to be an Everyman who represent the whole human community whose life is as corrupt and polluted as this Blockhead. Character or morality of a man has lost all significance in modern times. They have become terms whose sound does not appeal at all to the ears of men today, or are words that create only nuisance in life. Such a life without moral character is common in metropolitan conditions and so, the Elkunchwar too did not find it right to give him a name. he made him a mere reflection-less man. A man who has lost his reflection may not seem common and sound weird. But, this protagonist of the play, Reflection, is a common inhabitant of the modern material world where many such types are common. This representative of the common man finds at the very outset of the play that he has, to his dismay, lost his reflection and is astound to have come to know it. "I don't see a reflection or anything of the kind. I washed my face and looked in the mirror. Found it blank. Then I thought may be its dirty. So I cleaned and looked. Still it was blank. I screamed"(Elkunchwar.206). This sudden revelation of having lost his mirror image makes him so vulnerable and insecure that he succumbs to various miserable predictions as to what will people say if they come to know of this, or what will happen if his Boss, the Police officer, Rationing authority, the RTO officer or society got aware of this.

Man is not born degenerated or morally corrupt. The decay of his character is the culmination of a series of successive vice Karma. Elkunchwar indicates this gradual decay of moral fiber in ones personality in the play. The protagonist, the man-without-reflection, confesses that he was little aware of his reflection showing signs of being dejected and dissipated and have begun fading away. But he took no notice of this and rather gets scared of this:

What happened was- there I was looking in the mirror- looking really hard, you know, asking, who are you man? Who are you? Are you the same as I? I kept on asking the same question eye-to-eye, with great bravado- keeping my eyes fixed on the eyes in the reflection. And those eyes-they stared back at me, batting an eyelid- and those eyes seemed to turn to marbles. If I'd shoved a finger in them it would have gone straight through and left a dark hole. No blood, nothing. It knocked me right off. I moved away fast. After that I didn't dare go anywhere near it....what's come over it now? it has vanished without a qualm, no permission asked for, as if we had never known each other before.(Elkunchwar. 210)

This shows that even after being aware of his mirror image being blurred and repulsive, he didn't take care to mend it. It may be because he didn't know how to do that, but he remained insensitive towards his reflection and this resulted in its departure. The process of one's degeneration is similar one too. This man thus is aware of his "absolute immorality" and the impotency caused by it.

The Window of the Mind

A twist in the story has been created by the author to alleviate the monotony of the mundane through the imagination of a window of the mind. This window of the mind which

becomes a medium of having access into one another's mind, though it is an outside window of the fifth floor flat which also becomes the medium of protagonist's committing suicide at the end. Bai, who "builds up an elaborate logic to rationalize/legitimize the extraordinary phenomenon," "moves on to suggest a game of entering each other's minds. The game played initially between the two is repeated with two visitors, viz. Flags and the protagonist's girls, the colleague at the office."(Elkunchwar.xxvi) Thus this Window-of-the-Mind sets out game of entering each other's mind which allows the protagonist and others to observe at first hand the hidden and repressed feelings and eccentricities and the real nature of their psyche. Bai suggests:

Let's try it out. You tell me, no thoughts enter your mind. Suppose, I enter your mind. What do you say to that? And then watch what all happen. Now this window...it's the window of your mind, right? If I come through there, I enter your mind. Then, there is fun, and nothing but fun. Great jubilation. Joy, oh what great joy! Just try.(Elkunchwar.212)

The vices and immoral part of one's personality is always hidden from the outside world. One does not want others to come to know of that hidden part of his/her personality because of the inhibitions and taboos of the society. So the author provides here an access right into the minds of his characters so that we may observe ourselves the truth about modern men and women, as the protagonist, Bai and Mr. Flags and the the girl Broomstick are none other than the minuscule mirror of modern day society. Further, as the game of entering the mind begins, the woman (Bai) finds it difficult to get through the window of protagonist's mind and when she makes it out, she finds utter darkness and void in His mind which is so scary and unbearable for her. The author has thus managed very skillfully to create images in the play through which he succeeded in highlight the narrowness, meaninglessness, hollowness and darkness of modern man's mind. Bai articulates this truth of modern humanity in such words, "The window of your mind is so narrow. How can splendid, magnificent thoughts enter your mind?"(Ibid) This articulation charts out the complacent life of the metropolitan men which has begotten parochialism, selfishness and apathetic nature.

One another fantastic image has been created here by the author; that of the protagonist's entering his own mind. Bai forces him to enter his own mind and check for himself whether he can find his reflection there. She suggests him to try find "things you've lost, forgotten, discarded, thrown away. Things you don't want and do want."(Elkunchwar.216) But he also encounter nothing but the dim light, only a hazy spot and the rest is totally dark, in a heavy strained silence. Then all of a sudden the three bells -doorbell, telephone and the alarm- begin to ring one after another and suddenly stops after a while. It is followed by a scream of himself. The portrayal of His mind is such that even He doesn't find anything in His psyche but some rings that indicate his routine and dull life, darkness that highlights the void in his mind, and the scream of himself that shows His vulnerability and insecurity.

Flags's Cock-image

The appearance of the third character creates a twist in the play. "The game (Game of entering the mind) played initially between the two is repeated with two visitors, viz. Flags and the protagonist's girl, the colleague at the office, both of whom have lost their reflections; the game proving, in each case, the impossibility of the desire/dream"(Elkunchwar.xxvi). Flags seems to be insensitive at the loss of the protagonist's mirror image, so he is asked to see his one in the mirror. What Flags and the protagonist come to find is cock. Even though this Mr. Flags has not lost his reflection, but has distorted his image which is an indication of the distortion of his image in the eyes of the people even though he is not entirely corrupted man. This Mr. Flags represents the revolutionary class of society and so, calls Him the enemy of revolution. It is absurd that the Cock-man like Flags talk about revolution. However, the author might have wanted to suggest here that the revolutionary men, or the men who want to bring about some upheaval or revolt in the society, are no more than Cocks, as they crow their thoughts in a loud and shrill manner regardless of proper place and time like that of the Crows. Though the image of a Cock seems improper for the revolutionary men, but Flags is not only a revolutionary man, he even doesn't have moral stand and hence talks like puny revolutionary. A satiric parody has been created here when He enters the mind of Flags and feeds him with the thoughts of Exploitation, Class Struggle, Capitalism, Blood, Revolution, the Masses and so on. The protagonist reminds Flags of these thoughts to tease and torture him with the same weapon by which such revolutionary men like Flags bother the lives of other men. This can be said to be a revenge on this revolutionary. Moreover, such revolutionary men loath the characterless men like the protagonist in the society and are very critical of them. So the later too hate these men and do not want to leave any chance of teasing them.

Girl without Reflection

The proverb goes as "The bird of a feather flock together", so happens at the climax of the play. Surprisingly, all the reflectionless people gather at the same spot of protagonist's room. There appears a lady wearing synthetic saree and lipstick. Though the protagonist says that He doesn't know her, she tell Him that she works with him in the same office and loves Him, as she already knows that He has lost his reflection like herself. There is no dearth in the world of characterless and morally degraded men and women and such people find solace and comfort in the company of each other only. The men, who has his character intact and who dislike all the trivialities of immoral indulgences of these men, are loathsome for them. Sp this girl, who tells her name as Broomstick and is a married woman, too, arises at protagonist's room. This girl's debauched character became the cause of the loss of her reflection. She also, like the protagonist, carelessly kept unheeded the signs of fading away of her reflection which gradually became blur and vanished on day. The author intends to imply here that the decaying of one's reflection is in direct proportion of the gradual loss of one's moral fiber. Then, the truth of how corrupted and profligate both the protagonist and this girl are come out when they play the game of entering mind. The protagonist enters her mind and tell her, "you've played it with some people, and I with others. And it always ends up the same way"(Elkunchwar.239)

Then in the fashion of Absurd plays, without any reason or just to get rid of his life of boredom, the protagonist commits suicide. Thus, the fictitious character of the plot, nonsense trivialities, short and incomplete dialogues, senseless chattering of characters, hollowness and meaninglessness of life and suicide at the end of the play, all these features bring 'Reflection' near the Absurd drama.

Black Humour

Fantasy is one of the most integral parts of black humor or black comedy. In fact, the kind of effect the grotesque situations and scenes in black humor intend to create cannot be produced without due use of fantasy. The humorous and grotesque situations in 'Reflection' that have been created by using fantastic and exaggerated images result in a gloomy kind of humour which is called dark humour. The author of the black humor has to deal with the intensely grave issue in a comic way and showing such grave things in an exaggerated manner is a good way of ridiculing them. In 'Reflection', Elkunchwar presents men and women with no reflection who plays a game of entering each other's mind through a window which has been made to play as Window of the Mind. This grotesque picturisation of the fantastically grave issue of one's having lost his reflection is made absurd with short aphoristic language and satiric situations. Apart from generating laughter, the intention sometimes can also be to satirize the individual and social vices by showing them in exaggerated stature, such as we find in Reflection where the author sometimes ridicules the traditional notion of married wife or the loss of girls reflection when plays foul with her husband. This makes the tragic and serious issue in a black humor drama grotesque and farcical.

Conclusion

The magical or fantastical part has been so skillfully and flawlessly internalized in the plot of the play by Elkunchwar that it seems to be an integral part of the play and one does not use his reason while watching the play to think whether the impalpable is not palpable. This is all presented in an extraordinary arrangement of scenes and events that no doubts arise about the authenticity or the verisimilitude of the story.

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