

The Transformation of Rejection into Resistance: Usha Ganguli's Selected Plays

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Abstract

Resistance is one kind of protest against the domination and oppression. Usha Ganguli, the renowned theatre director, actor and playwright cum activist walks through the same path and gives voice to the so called "subaltern" who can ultimately resist and speak when they are thrust into neglected world by patriarchy. In this paper, I would like to go through her selected plays (*Hum Mukhtara* and *Rudali*). Both are the story of marginalized women who do not cow down to the circumstances, but they raise their voice against exploitation. Ganguli's plays give a vivid account of the vast human spirit to overcome obstacles and gain economic and political liberation, thus leading to the empowerment of oppressed and marginalized. In this paper, I want to show how the women discover their own way of dominion upon the so called upper classes and how the rejected one transforms into resistant one.

Keywords- *Patriarchy, Orientalism, Third World Feminism, Resistance, Subalternity*

Usha Ganguli is a well-known playwright and theatre director of her Kolkata based Hindi theatre group 'Rangakarmee'. Her plays always speak for the downtrodden, oppressed and marginalized, especially women. She was influenced by the 'People's Theatre Movement'. She chooses her theme for the dramas basically from contemporary issues of society, the exploitation of women by patriarchy. Her plays are mainly based on several adaptations from short stories of several languages. Her plays raise the voices for the voiceless. She does not believe in any type of feministic label, rather than she "believes in the liberation of women and their freedom, and I'm trying my best as a person, as a teacher and as a theatre worker to work towards that" (*Rudali-From Fiction to Performance, P-2*). Anjum Katyal expresses her view regarding 'Feminism' that,

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at this juncture, in this county, it is overloaded, problematic term. Widely seen as an imported Western concept strongly identified with white bourgeois concern and issues, the term is often aligned with elite urban intellectualism. (*Rudali-From Fiction to Performance*, P-2).

That is why the dramatist refuses the brand, 'feminism' though she basically works for their liberation. At present, the Western feminism keeps voicing for the social, political, personal, economic, and equality of sexes, educational and professional scopes for women, their reproductive rights including access to contraceptives and abortion and free-sex while the third world women fight for basic rights and respects. Third World feminism originates from internal ideologies and socio-cultural factors, not from the First World Feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her seminal essay, "Under Western Eyes", asserts that Western feminists regard the Third World women as a composite, singular construction that is arbitrary and limiting. These third World women are depicted in writings as victims of masculine control.

Ganguli's plays present double colonization of women in our society what,

Kristen Holst Peterson and Anna Ruthford in 1986 proposed that women in colonialism experience a 'double colonization'. By this they were gesturing at the extraordinarily oppressive and circumscribe context of women lives in colonialism, trapped by / within both patriarchy and colonialism (P. K. Nayar. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* Ch. *Postcolonial Theory*, P-172-173).

She moulds the subject of plays in her own way and never subjugates her protagonist before any oppression. The objective of this paper is to analyse the present condition of women and their colonial state in the postcolonial era and their resistance against the oppression through her selected plays ('*Rudali*' and '*Hum Mukhtara*').

The play is a dramatic adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's novella 'Rudali'. The play was enacted first in 1992. Her '*Rudali*', is the story of Sanichari and a tale of her transmission from a dotting, helpless and victimised woman into an enlightened and empowered woman. Sanichari and Bikhni are the main dramatic personae whose development and adjustment with the situation are depicted here. When society decides to trough woman in a specific ground of work for gender discrimination, the playwright takes advantage and utilizes this allotted ground with trickery and makes her protagonist a professional rudali. The profession makes her powerful and now she emphatically announces "the Malik-Majan now belongs to us" (*Rudali*, P-117). The dramatist not only helps them to cope up with the system but also helps to manipulate it on behalf of themselves. The writer points out Sanichari's inclination towards patriarchal or societal norms and regulation at the beginning of the drama. She was deeply entrapped and consistently plundered by the system. Usha Ganguli unswaddles the cultural ideological discourse of the upper class firstly by Bikhni and then by Dulan. She

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encourages and strengthens Sanichari and Bikhni's willpower and helps them to turn a ritualistic ceremony into a professional regular business.

The play begins at Sanichari's home and most part of the drama are set at her home. The director employs some well-chosen props to portray the wretched condition of the protagonist. At the right side of the stage, we see Sanichari is working with *chakki*. The monotonous creaking of the *chakki* symbolises pathetic urge of the protagonist. At the left side of the stage we see her ailing son Budhua, lying on the charpoy with consistent coughing and her old mother-in-law Somri wrapped in a tattered covering. She is nagging for some *roti* but Sanichari is unable to feed her because she has urgency and enough corn to grind. In return of grinding wheat she will receive some flour. At the very beginning, we understand that she is the only earning member of the family. When the play proceeds, we see that she is rebuked by her mother-in-law as an ill-fated woman who is responsible for their misfortune. The play gives the audience a place for their own judgment. The playwright repeatedly wants to penetrate thought provoking attitude to her audience or reader. The dramatist mocks the societal questions that it is Sanichari who was born on Saturday is responsible for their impoverish condition. The play reveals the truth. In scene II we see the death of Budhua. This is the first death presented on the stage. The death is a great loss for the family because she has already lost her father-in-law, her brother and bother-in-law and her husband. The death of Budhua first time reveals the snobbery of the upper caste. The statement of Vaidji at the time of Budhua's death is the perfect incarnation of this snobbery and cruelty.

VAID: Hurry up and give me my money. It's getting late. And I'll have to cleanse myself in the river before going home...

SANICHARI: What kind of man are you, Vaidji? My son is lying dead and all you can think of your fees.

VAID: Did you hear that? Did you hear what this daain said? She's dragged me here by force, and now she's thumbing her nose at me! Arre, till I get my money I'm not moving an inch! All you low caste people are the same – no knowledge of religion, no faith, no education! (P-132)

Really how ridiculous it is, the man wants money for doing nothing. When he came, Budhua was already dead. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* explains how the East is taken as an inferior and exotic other which needs to be civilized by the superior West. Here the upper classes are also applying the same trick to dominate the low classes. They make people inferior, 'other' in accordance with their knowledge, education, class, creed and religion like the Orientalist. This self/other binary gives them upper hand to the downtrodden people. They act like the colonial master who, "...occupy the places vacated by the former European masters. They become the new ruling classes" (P-115, P. K. Nayar: *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*).

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The play emphatically points out the exploitation of the poor in the name of religion by the upper class people. The so called ritualistic *kriya* ceremony thrusts the family in a tremendous poverty. For her husband's *kriya* Sanichari has taken loan from Ramavatar Singh that has made her bonded labour for five years and for Budhua's *kriya* ceremony she is forced to sell her only means of living her '*chakki*'. How the Brahmins plunder them in name of religion and the fear of sin is evident in Sanichari-Bikhni's conversation,

SANICHARI: ...I was forced to perform two *kriya* ceremonies for my dead husband?

BIKHNI: Really?

SANICHARI: Really. The Tohri panda told me that since you're here, you must make the pinda offering before you go. I paid a rupee and a quarter for an offering of sand and sattu. What a to-do there was in our village panchayat over this! That bastard Mohanlal said, how can a Tohri brahman know how we hold a *kriya* ceremony in Tahad village! He landed me with a second *kriya* ceremony. I had to feed the whole village on curds and chivda after taking a loan from Ramavatar.

BIKHNI: D'you mean to say that the brahmans of Tohri village are different from the brahmans of Tahad village?

SANICHARI: Who knows... the thakur and brahmans are all in this together. They control everything. It took me five years to pay off my debt to the thakur. (P-156)

The dramatist for the first time reveals the power politics and employs someone who questions the prevalent constitution that helps to enkindle a liberal thought in Sanichari. Here Bikhni and Dulan work as an instrumental for her development.

In another words, the playwright projects Bikhni when the both women are completely alone, without any male guardian of the family. The author also does it to subvert the gender identity of women. The gender identity delimits the scope of women by confining her in societal norms and regulations. Nyla Ali Khan in her essay, "The woman question in subcontinent" asserts that, "...the image of woman as powerful mother underlines economic independence for women and reinforces her strength and courage of conviction to sacrifice for the family" (*Daily Times*). Here the both women are free from those identities. Now they are no one's wife, no one's daughter, no one's mother and this liberation from old age inhibition empowers both of them. When their private sphere of emotion and grief are under control of Malik-Mahajan and the constant exploitation restrains their expression of sorrow, they turned the grief into commodity to manipulate the exploiter. Instead of so many death in her family Sanichari was unable to cry. That is why people even her family member also rebuked her as '*daain*'. But in realily she was busy in ritualistic ceremony and found no time to express her grief. Here the "grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival. Grief is

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turned into a commodity, and mourning is labour. If sorrow is controlled by the Malik-Mahajan, tears can be used as a produce, a source of earning by professional mourners.”(P-5)

The play portrays the plight not only of Sanichari but also of other women. The ‘*Malik-Mahajan*’ unfolds them, uses them, abuses them and then throws them in ‘red light district’. Ganguli attacks *Malik-Mahajan* who destroys many women’s life by creating artificial poverty and thrust them in prostitution. Parbatia is forced to work for Lachman Singh for a square of meals. The drama apparently picturizes her willing submission to Lachman Singh, but severely circumscribed poverty-ridden world forced her to do so. Parbatia, Gulbadan and many other women pass through the same experiences. When Sanichari decodes the exploitation by the help of Dulan, she went to the whorehouse and offers the professional work of rudali to them. She encourages them for doing this work because it will secure their earning and at the same time this will be one kind of revenge, ‘*a subaltern tool of revenge*’ of their (malik-mahajan) wrong doing. Now Sanichari can understand the wretched condition of another woman in this patriarchal society. So, she unites the impoverished women and makes an agency.

I would like to draw the same aspect in her another play ‘*Hum Mukhtara*.’ The play is based on a real life incident, the plight of a gang-raped victim from Pakistan. She was raped by the powerful clan Mostoi as a punishment for indiscretions supposedly committed by her brother. That victimized woman had decided to fight back, and her indomitable spirits topsy-turvy the feminist movement in Pakistan. Her name was Mukhtar Mai, and her decision to stand up against the exploiters who only take women as sexual object was an act of bravery which is hardly heard in third world countries, like India and Pakistan. The playwright was,

...amazed by the extra-ordinary courage and strength of purpose shown by an ordinary girl from a remote village in Pakistan. When I read the news that the accused had been acquitted, I was shocked beyond words. I decided to portray the life of this brave girl for the Indian audience everywhere where many Mukhtar Mais are still suffering from brutal torture and injustice at the court of law but either are not aware of their right to fight back or are too afraid of the consequences to fight back. (*Hum Mukhtara: Theatre As A Political Statement, The Citizen*)

Hum Mukhtara is a drama of a woman’s fight, survival and win over her tormentors. “I do not seek revenge, I am not cowed down by terror, all I seek is justice,” says Mukhtara again and again. She is also a symbolic woman across the world victimized by physical and mental violence not only through rape but also by the legal and judicial system of a country dominated by patriarchy. In this sense, Mukhtar Mai is a motivation to the oppressed ones.

The play begins with a group of young women who covers themselves in black burquas. The women perform as chorus. They cover their faces with shroud that symbolises

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the veiling condition of women under the patriarchal domination. The author cum director cum actress Usha Ganguli performs as the main chorus. She affirms how the patriarchy binds women by traditional norms and regulations and imposes limitation on women's movement,

Do not go there; do not do this or wear that; you are attacked because you are covering yourself and you can be attacked if you dress differently. They see wrong in everything you do, every word you utter. Why must women bear with all this, tell us?

The ropes which were hanged for the stage decoration are also very symbolic. When the victim played with the ropes and wrapped the rope around her throat, it symbolises her mental agony. She wants to die because there is no reason to be alive. She questions herself what she will do to live a life without any honour (izzat). She has lost her honour and she knows now what she and her family have to face. Ultimately she does not choose the escape route of suicide. She takes her case to court. She faces so many obstacles, humiliation and harassment by the locale police and she gets suggestion to give thumb impression on a blank paper. Ganguli depicts how the powerful men utilise law for their own purpose. Mukhtar Mai may have lost her case because of the lack of sufficient proof but she made an example for all women across the world of sticking to the demand for justice. The chorus comes back with their faces covered in black in the end, but the removal of masks reveals their faces mute in protest but loud in their anger, showing their faces through torch light. 'The black backdrop tends to make the women invisible to the audience but perhaps this is done by design – women are socially conditioned to remain 'invisible.' The dramatist finally speaks for all women and represents them as strong willed who utter, "Na banengi hum mom ki battiyaan, banengi hum dhadhakti mashaalien Hum Mukhtara, ek baar nazar daudhaao, udhar dekho ... sab Mukhtara!" (We refuse to be wax candles, we will be flaming torches we are Mukhtara, look here, look at us, all Mukhtara!). The hall echoed when the curtains came down with the women chanting these lines. *Hum Mukhtara* is a strikingly original presentation that encompasses many forms of theatrical performances to narrate a single story. The acting by the chorus and Usha Ganguli and the men is amazingly praiseworthy. The title *Hum Mukhtara* in straightforward manner expresses of Mukhtara that is hidden in all of us, waiting to emerge.

For many those who are quite familiar with Ganguli's works, it is not difficult for them to imagine what is going to happen at the end of the drama. At the end of performance, we get a strong message from her dramas—inspiration of fighting against patriarchy, and higher classes in the post-colonial world. Thus, in *Rudali*, the higher classes reinforce the subalternity upon Sanichari and other women, but they do not fully succumb to the system, rather they discover their own way of dominion upon the so called upper classes. In *Hum Mukhtara*, Mukhtara did not get justice and the accused was set free for insufficient proof but it also takes as a significant step towards women liberation. She started a school for girls. The

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portrayal of sub-altered women reveals that subalternity is purely constructed by society and the plight of those low-bred and low cultured individuals advantageously serves those who are with hegemonic power. By presenting the plight of subalternity through an active engagement with an audience, there is a ray of hope that the plight of these women will create considerable drive for social changes. In early English writing (such as Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand) the women are portrayed as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men but in Usha Ganguli's works they are highlighted as rebels to fight against the injustices perpetuated upon them.

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