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www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Value-Concerns and Contemporary Indian Drama: A Study of Gurcharan Das' *9 Jakhoo Hill*

Sudeep Kumar

Research Scholar,
Department of English and Cultural Studies,
Panjab University,
Chandigarh.
India.

Abstract:

The rise of middle class in India is a phenomenon in itself. Along with other academic disciplines – sociology, economics, political science, anthropology – literature has attempted to give a critique of it. A shift has taken place from old aristocrats and upper middle class to neo-rich Indian middle – class. Literature has its own 'reaction' to this experience. Who else than the sensitive writer in Gurucharan Das, an ex – CEO of P & G worldwide, can better represent this great Indian predicament? Modern India stands on the verge of a social revolution where an old order dissolves to a new order where everything is justified from 'materialistic' perspective. A generation of Indian dramatists takes up the cudgels to problematize this trend. This great Indian predicament is deliberated in their writings. The present paper, with Das' *9 Jakhoo Hill* as a special case, is an attempt to document the response of Indian drama towards this development.

Mankind has achieved tremendous progress in materialistic terms with the passage of time; but, the by-product of this progress is a decline in moral and social values. As, from the ancient times, literature has been the mirror of the society, this decline of socio-moral values has become one of the chief concerns of the modern literature. Gurcharan Das, a graduate from Harvard Business School (AMP), the corporate guru and the Ex-Vice President for Procter & Gamble Worldwide, has given a peep inside the working of this materialistic world through his literary works and the scholastic articles he writes for the leading dailies like the "Times of India" and "*Dainik Bhaskar*" etc. His play *9 Jakhoo Hill* betrays his sense of regret over declining moral and social values in our Indian society. In "Introduction" to the collective edition of his three plays, Das makes clear:

The most striking feature of contemporary India is the rise of a confident middle class, which is full of energy and drive and is making things happen. That it goes about it in an uninhibited and amoral fashion is also true. ... The New class is street smart; it has had to fight to rise from the bottom and it has learnt to manoeuvre the system. It is easy to despair over its vulgarity, its new-rich mentality and its lack of education. But whether India can deliver the goods depends a great deal on it. (*Three English Plays*.p.17)

The play, *9 Jakhoo Hill*, is basically a story of two migrated families from Lahore to India after Partition. The main theme of the play is how the baton of power and responsibility is changing hands after the introduction of the economic reforms in India. As Gurcharan Das says: "On one level *9 Jakhoo Hill* is about the changing order – the old middle class giving way to the new. Ansuya and her family belong to the old class and Deepak and Chitra to the new." (*Three English Plays*.p.16-17) The change in social-structure had begun in the India of 1960s but all this became explicit in 1980s and 1990s. But before making this changing

social order responsible for the decline in moral and social values, it is very necessary to understand the nature of this change. Heimsath, a noted sociologist, explains this phenomenon as:

In India, social reform did not ordinarily mean a reorganization of the structure of society at large, as it did in the West, for the benefit of underprivileged social economic classes. Instead it meant the infusion into the existing social structure of new ways of life and thought: the society would be preserved; while its members would be transformed (*Social Movements in India*.p.225)

Thus the middle class remains the same, but its inhabitants and their manners have changed with the change in social-order. Gurcharan Das is determined to expose the money-mindedness and lack of social graces in this neo-rich class through Deepak and his mother Chitra; see, how they are caricaturized:

Deepak,... he has cultivated the social graces, including a public school way of speaking English ('What the hell, yaar,' 'Give him ten chips, yaar.')....

Chitra, wears synthetic saris, too low to be tasteful. She is coarse, has no qualms about taking advantage of people and will go to any lengths to make sure her son succeeds in life. She speaks with Punjabi mannerisms ('Helloji,' 'Thank you ji.'). (*Three English Plays*.p.155)

Deepak is a successful Executive in a company in Bombay. He and his mother have come to meet their family friends i.e. Amrita's family in Shimla; but the real motive of this money-hungry class is something else. Deepak's company is bidding for a licence and the government officer concerned is Rai Saheb, a family friend of Amrita's. Chitra explains the purpose in a hushed voice, "If Rai Saheb says 'yes,' Deepak's company will get the licence. And he's a friend of yours, Didi." (*Three English Plays*.p.158) As is clear from this excerpt, money is everything for this new-rich class and they can go to any extent to accomplish their targets. Rai Saheb, "who is one of that breed which is more British than the British" (*Three English Plays*. p.144), is also exposed in the course of the play. He is an ICS officer, Secretary to the Government of India; but how petty-minded and scandal-lover is he, we can judge from his conversation with Ansuya:

Rai Saheb: I say, do you know that the Khanna's ayah is pregnant?

Ansuya: (Fascinated.) What? Who is the father?

Rai Saheb: (Smiling.) Naughty, naughty! When I mentioned it to Colonel Khanna this evening, he, of course, went red. (*Three English Plays*.p.150)

The play is set in 1962, while Sino-Indian war was going on. Our army was losing its posts one by one, and in such a melancholic mood, such petty indulgence from a highly placed ICS officer is quite condemnable.

One more shocking aspect, revealed in the play, is degraded interpersonal relationships; for example, Ansuya's 'Mamu' Karan Chand has incestuous feelings for her. At one juncture in the play, he says, "... I like holding your hand, Ansu. It feels so warm. (He kisses her hand.) Ansuya, there's something I've been wanting to tell you..." (*Three English Plays*.p.165) It is true that it was Mamu, who stood by Ansuya's family in odd hours, and went to the extent of leaving his job as University Professor to take the charge of their drowning mills, and he and Ansuya are emotionally very close to each-other, but even then, incest is incest. The dramatist doesn't leave any scope for misreading and gives final black stroke on the character when Ansuya, 26, reveals that she loves Deepak, 27; Mamu, himself 48 years old, is made to

Mamu: It's because he's young.

Ansuya: Mamu!

Rai Saheb: Filthy, I say. Abusing his own sister's trust. (*Three English Plays*.p.185)

Now Gurcharan Das focuses over the downward trend in moral ethics of the new middle-class through Deepak and Chitra. The latter one is portrayed as an epitome of money-mongers. To get a licence for her son, she does not have any inhibition to flout the sanctity of her own marital-bond and even sacrifices her own son's love for Ansuya. In the final act, Chitra is gone with Rai Saheb for the club, but it's quite long since then. Deepak is worried for his mother. Suddenly she appears on the stage in a fully drunk situation:

Deepak: You've been drinking again, Ma!

Chitra: (For Rai Saheb.) *Kya mard hai*, Deepak! I tell you won't find another one like him... Oh Deepak, *kya life hai*, *kya manners!* (Hiccup).

Deepak: And now you're drinking during the day?

Chitra: (winking.) Oh-no, *thodi si to pi hai!*

Deepak: And what's happened to your clothes?

Chitra: (Smiling.) A bit crushed, are they?

Deepak: They're a mess.

Chitra: (Her eyes light up.) Son, it is done. Your future is *pucca*, and your licence *meri mutthi mein hai!* (*Three English Plays*.p.190)

She denies Ansuya as a bride for her son, reason being her family has lost its earlier grandeur. For Chitra, a typical neo-rich class representative, a marriage is a business contract where only monetary conditions are worthy to be discussed and considered. When Deepak protests to save his love and explains that there is no need for more money, as he is doing well; her answer is quite worthy to be quoted: "Oh-ho, we always need more money. There is never enough. Oh, *tu kya jaanta hai*, what it is like to grow up poor. What do you know what it was like to be tenants of these people in Lahore? *Kisi ke tukdon per palna*, *tu kya jaanta hai?* After partition, what do you know what it was like to be a petty *kirana-walla's* wife in Ghatkopar? (Disgust in her voice.) Ghatkopar!" (*Three English Plays*. p.191). She even doesn't stop here pleading her case for Rai Saheb's niece and further goes to a new low in her character:

Chitra : ... Do you know what I have done for you today?

Deepak : What?

Chitra : Main abhi kahan se aa rahi hoon, tujhe pata hai?

Deepak : Yes, yes, I know. You went to the club with Rai Saheb.

Chitra : Haan. Rai Saheb ke saath gai zaroor thi. But not the club. To his house. Ek ghanta unke saath bita³kar aa rahi hoon! Samjhe?

Deepak : What? You mean....? (The realization of what she has done dawns on him.) No, Ma! No!

Chitra : Oh, yes ! (*Three English Plays*.p.193)

In this way, we can see how new middle-class is mad after success and has no ethics to guide conduct of its members in public sphere. At last, Deepak also conceded as, “You’ll have your way! You always have!” (*Three English Plays*.p.194) But in this process, he has become the mouthpiece of the writer, the corporate guru, who can see, from his vantage point, where the actual problem is. Deepak is made to say, “You [Ma] taught me to go after success, Ma. And I did. You forget to warn me there might be others in the way. I’m your puppet, Ma. Pull the string. Pull it harder. Choke me.” (*Three English Plays*.p.194) Therefore, it is the desire for possession which has resulted in personal crisis in this new-rich class.

It is not that only neo-rich class is devoid of ethics, but the aristocratic class is also suffering from the ailments of excessive mannerism, the tendency to show-off. It is because it does not realize the present day reality. This class of aristocratic people fails to realize that their time is gone. This class is also in shambles as is clear from the following events. There is a financial crisis in Amrita’s family and the situation has become worse to such a level that their house is up for sale. But the landlady has something else on the agenda. The following excerpt will expose the hypocrisy:

Amrita : How do you like my new sari ? (And she turns around to show it to everyone.)

Mamu : It’s beautiful !

Ansuya : It should be. It’s the most expansive sari in Shimla.

....

Ansuya : Someone has to think of money, Amma.

Amrita : (Animatedly.) The Colonel complimented me on it, and Mrs. Dewan kept looking at it the whole evening. (*Three English Plays*.p.151)

The setting of the play in terms of time i.e. Sino-Indian war of 1962, is also functional. The war interferes in the routine activities of the old middle class only just to put in contrast the futile, petty and good for nothing life-style of this very class. Rai Saheb is made to tell his routine in these words: “... But what is there to do in Shimla, my dear – except go to the Mall every evening; find your friends eating ice-cream at Scandal Point; drag them to the Green Room for the latest gossip;... And throng to the Sunday morning for bingo and bear!” (*Three English Plays*.p.150)

Thus, the upper middle-class of early 1960s was good for nothing, even devoid of patriotic feelings; and is well-replaced by the new parallel social order. This new class is totally desire-driven and has succeeded in gaining sparkling fruits of success, but the point to be noted is, all these fruits are achieved at the cost of self-degradation. As says B.K. Ramanujam, “According to the law [Doctrine of Karma] a man’s desire determines his

However coarse it may be, it is the growth engine of our country. Today India is passing through the stage of transition, and social grace, of course, has to be preceded by success on economic front. The present study shows Indian society only in the transition period from which each powerful economy has to pass through. The play, *9 Jakhoo Hill*, as it emphasizes on the critical balance between economic progress and maintaining social and moral values, has its relevance in the India of 1960s when it was written, of 1990s when it was for the first time enacted and also in modern India of 21st century.

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