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(Re)Reading *The Exorcist*

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The potency of literature has always been in the fact that it leads us to transcend the mundane realm of mortal experiences to an unexplored, audacious, at times bizarre domain to quench our thirst of becoming something 'other'. That is why, we turn cluster of pages repeatedly as mysteries of generations are unveiled through it, and we interpret those pages within our background. Interpreting literary texts has never been easy for scholars because they are not some historical data in a regular sense inked to be taken word by word. The stories, the folklores, the myths that run through literature within the veins of our generation are akin to an anagram, the contorted reality that are pieces to be cherished and preserved yet at times call for closer scrutiny and decoding by scholars. For an instance, the stories of Vampires and Werewolves are popular among people and teenagers in particular. Vampires are the ones that feed on the blood of humans and are the creatures of night. On the other hand, Werewolves are the humans who have the ability to convert themselves to wolf once in a month when the moon is full. Now, the logic that carves these supernatural creatures are very much natural; Vampires are nothing but the overt sexual desires of humans, whereas Werewolves are apparently connected with the menstruation cycle of women and hence, are the enemies of Vampires. Similarly, an ethnic reading can be done of ghost stories; someone that is marginalized and seeking their position in the collage of our society. A Marxist reading of God and Satan has often been witnessed time and again where God is the capitalistic force against which works Satan as a rebel. Likewise demonic possession can be read in the backdrop of sexual exploitation and authority over the body of the other.

Now, where does *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty comes in this whole picture? It is just one more addition of a story of possession by a demon, so a Feminist reading or an Oriental reading or any other such observation may suffice the need. However, the cult value of this novel does not lie in the fact that it can be deciphered in such different ways but that it imbibed the horrors that are the defining features of postmodern generation. It is analogous to Casandra syndrome where its warnings were overlooked and ignored yet now; we are experiencing the brunt of it.

The Exorcist

The Exorcist is the story of Chris MacNeil, a divorced lady and movie star, and her twelve-year-old daughter Regan. Chris along with her daughter has shifted to Georgetown for filming a movie where she finds assistance from her secretary Sharon and two housekeepers Karl and Willie. As the story moves on, we find strange activities in the house of Chris, such as, noises coming from the attic or Regan complaining of bed to be shaking. Later, Chris finds unusual changes in the mannerism of Regan, who plays with Ouija board and has created some make-believe friend named Captain Howdy. At first, she ignores all such activities of Regan thinking she must be feeling alone dealing with the divorce and change of place in her own way, and proposes the need to spend more time with her. However, the conditions get worse and Regan becomes eccentric and aggressive by nature following to

which she becomes severely ill and shows the symptoms of split-personality. Doctors never find the definite cause of her illness and thus, conclude that either she is feigning her illness, or it is a case of “what Freud used to call the ‘conversion’ form of hysteria, which grows from unconscious feelings of guilt and the need to be punished” (Blatty, 136).

The alleged second personality of Regan gains control over her and becomes malevolent trying to destroy her. Thus, seeking no help in medicine, Chris turns towards religion, to a local Jesuit priest, Father Damien Karras, for help; to perform the exorcism on Regan. Karras who himself is having his own doubts as per with religion agrees to help Regan not as a priest but as a psychotherapist. After his encounter with Regan, he believes that the act of exorcism may help her psychologically to believe that the demon has left, and she is cured. He seeks permission from the bishop to perform the act where later does not find him fit enough to carry all this alone. Hence, he appoints the experienced Merrin for the task who further allows Karras to assist him. The lengthy exorcism tolls the two priests physically and emotionally and in the process, the older Merrin suffers catastrophic heart attack that leads to his death. The job falls over Karras to finish who then invites demon to seize his body rather than that of girl's. The devil seeing the opportunity possesses the priest who has rekindled his faith in God. With this rejuvenated faith, Karras finally sacrifices his life to save Regan's.

Epiphany while (Re)Reading *The Exorcist*

Forty years have passed since this novel first published in 1971 and is still celebrated as the iconic horror novel that tortured and scared its readers like nothing else. Today, if we read this novel against the backdrop of economic crisis of America in 1970s, we'll discover the psychology working behind the characters of this novel. America at that time emerged as a nation coping with transition feeling the pressure of recession and shock of political scandals. People had no one to look up to; the authorities were dismantled and the faith on them was lost. People like Chris MacNeil and Karras were fighting hard to fit themselves into the conversion though they had no clue what was happening around them. American Cinema also felt the burn of economic crisis as the studios were shutting down and the big names were finding hard to survive. So they turned towards sex and sensuality to shock and attract their audience with something that has never been experienced by them before. In the novel, the character Burke Dennings, director of Chris's movie, dies a brutal death on “Hitchcock Steps” suggests the turn that cinema was taking where avant-garde were being placed or replaced with penny dreadful, that is, with the cinema of sex and sensations.

Now, such an unintelligible and utterly confusing era would have certainly distorted the psyche of youth and Regan emerges as the prototype of them. The paranoid behaviour expressed by Regan in the novel exhibits the horror and hatred of the youth in the budding period of an era that resembled to ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing’. To offset the loss of a big Other, Regan created her own small Other in the form of demon inside her. We can understand this concept when we see people putting all blames of mishaps in this world and of their failures as some kind of conspiracy theory or on to the so-called occult organization, ‘Illuminati’, that many believe pull the strings of our society determining the fate of mankind as per their will.

The appalling descriptions of the devil sexually exploiting the girl is nothing but the fetish desire of gratifying sexual urges through pain as ‘when we are no longer subject to the law of the big Other then we are likely to counterbalance this loss of official authority by invoking ‘private laws’ or relationships of dominance and subjection’ (Myers, 33-34).

Furthermore, the bodily deformation that Regan goes through is one of the rituals that postmodern subjects use to assert their identity, 'what Slavoj Zizek terms the 'cut in the body', such as, tattooing, piercing and bodily mutation' (Myers, 40).

Conclusion

The disturbing and abominable picture that this novel carves out of our generation appeared as a last appeal to readers to keep their faith on the grand-narrative with the belief that it will save them from the disgusting scenario as Regan was saved. The panic of postmodern subjects in the inchoation of this era can be understood as if the whole culture was thrown into the realm of Imaginary where the subjects gained authority over themselves yet it came with a loss, hence, the hue and cry. The intensity of the horror has now faded, not completely lost but has become deliquescent. The paranoia of Regan has been turned into schizophrenia of the current lot who is not able to decipher the difference between real and unreal. The then Regan has been turned into Lady Gaga or Kesha or Taylor Momsen or any other such celebrity of our time who celebrates the twisted idea of communion with devil and encourages others to do the same through their songs. To cite an example, in the music video 'Judas' Lady Gaga projects the idea of embracing Judas along with Jesus which she apparently does and projects herself as a nun to whom the world is not able to understand. She in another music video 'Applause' comes out as a puppet in the hands of Satan and conveys her gratitude towards him as he has given her the fame, she desired apropos of her services. These purported rebels in order of simulating the acts of rebellion against the authorities of whom we have no clue as what and who they are, they have actually created the symptoms of madness in this society. 'The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven' (Milton); we like Satan have chosen to reign over the hell which is animated with bliss of deceived authority.

This novel, *The Exorcist*, predicted long back the results of the mutation that our society is going through. Analogous to Casandra syndrome, no one took it seriously back then yet a rereading now may enlighten us and counsel us as to how we may regain our sanity. At least, Regan had Father Karras to save her; don't know what kind of sacrifice this generation will demand to save itself from damnation.

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