



Feminine Sensibility: Diverse Approaches in Poile Sengupta's play *Alipha*

Dr. Dipti Agrawal, Assistant Professor, Sunbeam Women's College Varuna, Varanasi

Abstract

Alipha reallocates the teaching of the alphabet, the Indian alphabet, from the world of innocence to that of gender conflict. The two extremes of Indian society are depicted throughout this drama with only two characters-The first one is a politician to show the corruption in the political field and the second is an activist who works for the betterment of society. The parallel themes are political and gender issues of violence against women, sometimes perpetuated directly and sometimes indirectly. While dovetailing two stories at the same time, Sengupta has established a believable connection between them and unfolds many hidden aspects of feminism in the context of Indian society. Sengupta envisages profound changes in traditional social structures, such as family, women's economic role and power, fundamental attitudes, and personal relationships, leading to just social order. Therefore, her plays cannot be said to represent an "identity crisis". Rather they exhibit a complete deconstruction of identity and this freedom raises his characters to be 'alive', an elevation from deadly old customs and beliefs.

Keywords: Feminism, Identity, Gender issues, Alphabets, Deconstruction

Introduction

Poile Sengupta's brilliance of writing is proved in the very beginning of the play *Alipha* when she has described the setting of the play which in turn, sheds light on the main theme too. Beginning with the description of the setting of the play, Poile Sengupta has given a few hints on the theme of the play too. She indicated that Twenty years is covered within the small canvas of the play. And on this, she is successful in depicting two altogether different worlds of rich and poor, women and man, exploiter and exploits with the brilliant co-relation between them. In the words of Poile Sengupta:

"In the writing of the play, there was a need for careful construction, so that the two narratives dovetailed and yet each storyline was independently carried forward. While the woman's story travels across two decades, the man's is told in real-time, in the space of a single evening. His tale is in recollection, and the dramatic moment occurs when the two-time horizons merge." (WCS, 215)

No significant names are given to the two characters of the play. They are simply given the names Man and Woman as they can represent any “man” and “woman” in society. With this technique of introducing and depicting characters, the audience can connect themselves easily with the characters or one can say that the audience can find themselves on stage within these two characters in one or other aspects. Poile Sengupta herself asserts that, “The girl and the man-they remain nameless- do not ever meet on stage; their acting areas, and their worlds, remain explicitly demarcated and exclusively their own.” (WCS, 215)

The story starts with the voice of Woman, who is talking to one of her imaginary friends named Asma. Though we cannot see Asma throughout the play, this imaginary person was addressed by Woman from the very beginning till the end of the play whenever she wants to express her deep emotions, feelings, and observation of surprising truths found accidentally. It represents a sense when a woman feels convenient to express her real emotions only to another woman and not a man because she knows that only a woman can understand the life and emotions of another woman. This very first dialogue of the play also reveals to the audience that Woman is a small girl in the beginning as she childishly fights with her friend Asma and then addresses her to be her best friend forever, just like small children use to do.

In contrast, the opening or the very first dialogue of Man reveals his middle-agedness and his dissatisfaction with his life since he was expelled from college at the age of twenty. His wicked character is somewhat reflected when he says that he resembles his father in that wicked personality, behaviour, and attitude. His rustication from the college was like a black spot on his father’s political career and he was exiled by his father from that city too. That’s why we find the man always in angry, depressed, and abusive behaviour. In an interview with Dr. Anita Singh, Poile Sengupta describes the physical, social, and psychological entrapment of both genders:

“Gender ideology became important to me as my plays began to take shape. From my perspective, as a woman and my observation of women across socio-economic groups, I found that self-survival and nurturing are strong motivators... now, with an increasing number of women in urban and semi-urban India becoming financially independent, there is greater hope for them. However, caste, violence, political neglect or harassment and unmitigated poverty still exist, and then seriously affect not only women and children, but men too.”

Exactly when Man was spitting anger on his servant, the dialogue of Woman connects his behaviour with Ravana of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* to find the same resemblance of angry red eyes of Man as Ravana had. When Woman reached her adolescent age, she observed the lusty and angry eyes of Man, when he visited her school at a function, “Chee! He looks as if he drinks liquor instead of water. Did you see his eyes? Like red gooseberries. Like Ravana’s eyes. (pause)... He was looking at all the girls.” (WCS, 224-225) And it is also indicated by her innocently that Rama is always there in the society to kill Ravana. Here, some sudden questions come to the mind of the reader: Does always Rama protect women from the evil eyes and deeds of Ravana? Who is crueller- Ravana of Treta Yuga or Ravana of the Modern age? The answers to these questions can be explored through a close study of the play *Alpha*.

Gender issues are going in a parallel manner, as we see the stigma and sexual suffering of the Aunt of Woman when she was a child. The Little Woman was beaten frequently by her Aunt when she didn’t concentrate on her studies, rather used to play all the time. Being poor, her Aunt always desired her to be educated and pursue a reputable job. That’s why she tortured her whenever she used to watch her playing. The Aunt started selling her body to another character in the play- the rich politician’s son Man. And this is how the different worlds of both of the characters got connected. Man use to visit the Aunt frequently only for sexual pleasure without even seeing her and knowing her name as it used to be always dark in that room of their meeting. The Aunt represents all those females of the society who are bound to sell their bodies to

earn a livelihood and to give a better life and education to the young ones of the family. It is visible in the words of Man, “Once when I asked her her name... she said... Call me whatever you want... it’s all the same. (Laughs) So I did just that. I called her a different name each night... and she responded... as if ... as if she didn’t care.” (WCS, 224)

Man could only recognize the fragrance of Jasmine flowers with which the Aunt used to adore herself. The whole day Man used to wait for the night. This was the only relief of his banished life so he got accustomed to or addicted to it. He said in one of his monologues: “I was twenty and completely smitten. Obsessed. (pause) I was in the coils of a woman about whom I knew nothing... not even her name.” (WCS, 222) He continues while encapsulating those nights “You know something? Apart from the sensations of the night, I didn’t have much life those days. I slept through the mornings and afternoons and surfaced only in the evening... (laughs) Like a resident of a red light area.” (WCS, 225)

The financial condition of Aunt was getting better as Man paid her enough for her intimation with him. And with this, the little Woman was getting new clothes, bags, and other comforts now. She even got admission to the only English medium school in that district. The girl was extremely happy because her friend, Asma was in the same school. The life of the Woman was getting better but the life of the Aunt was getting worse. Woman asserts to her imaginary friend Asma,

“Asma, I can’t believe it. I just can’t. I have got a double promotion. And I am now in your class... with you. Oh Asma, I am so lucky... so very lucky... (pause). Who? Aunty? I don’t know. She has changed so much. She looks so tired ... But today again she says she has some correction work to finish and she will be in the next room. You know Asma, I still don’t understand why she locks my door every night. She has done it all these years. She keeps a jug of water on the table for me,” (WCS, 223)

The objectification of Aunt in the eyes of man came to the surface when Man didn’t have any emotional feelings for her even after sleeping with her daily almost for three years. The aunt was only a sexual object in the play as the Man describes his feelings about her: “I wasn’t really interested in her, you know... beyond the activities of the night... she was the body of a woman who knew its job. And knew it bloody well.” (WCS, 223) The reality of women having no identity other than a sexual object is very well described by Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*:

“She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” (xxii)

The health of the Aunt deteriorated due to continuous self-imposed distress and one day she died. With her death, the source of family income, fees of the little girl’s English school, and all her other comforts stopped, and once again the life of Woman got miserable. Man was so habitual of the physical pleasures with the Aunt that he got extremely angry after her death and stopped giving money to the postman who used to bring him to the Aunt. Man says, “I went mad. I couldn’t bear it. How could she leave me and go off altogether? How dare she die? ... I wanted revenge. Revenge. So I... I decided to stop paying school fees.” (WCS, 227)

Woman was growing and getting more confident with time, but she got shocked by the news from the school that her fees had stopped being paid. Hence she decided to do a job to continue her studies as now she is developed as a stronger woman in comparison to what she was in her childhood- shy, timid, and always afraid. She is working in a garment factory now. Gradually she came to know that the postman was none other than her uncle- her Father's brother. When she was describing her past life with her dead father, a few more social evils came to surface. Her father was a wild sort of person and couldn't see anything torturous around him. While one of his fighting for people's rights campaigns, he married a poor widow to help her. But here social stigma worked when his family abandoned him due to this. Society cannot change with the effort of one person only. A collective effort and support of family and society are needed too. This is one more dark side of society that despite accepting such a generous action of her father, everyone looked down upon him and he was banished from his own family and society. A satirical glimpse of the modern education system also came to surface when Woman describes her father in these words: "The family promptly disowned him. So he went to another town looking for a job. He was the first class first in the University but he ended up as a cook ... can you imagine that? He couldn't get any other job." (WCS, 229)

After describing this miserable condition of society, Woman continued to describe her present job to her imaginary friend Asma. She was enjoying her job of taking care of small children in Anganwadi. She used to teach them alphabets differently and innovatively through connecting different sounds of the alphabet with many practical things or sounds of life. She described her teaching method to Asma in the letter: "This is aa, I tell them .. aa is for shaking tooth. And when do you say aaa? Maybe when you drink cold water on a hot day? Aaa! Yes. Yes... Ee is when you see a mouse in the corner ... eee is a baby crying.. Oo is biting a green chilli by mistake, oooo is bathing with cold water early in morning. The children love it. (Laughs)" (WCS, 231)

After a few years, Woman started teaching grown-up women in the same place- Anganwadi. But teaching seemed difficult to her now. She was puzzled about how to teach them because the same Hindi vowel sounds are having different meanings in their lives. She asserts to Asma:

"Dear Asma ... I'm finding it so difficult to teach the women. How can I teach them the alipha?... what a difference! (Rises and speaks out) For the women .. aa is their husbands pinching their arm ... aaa ... is a slap across the face .. ee .. is when he picks up a stick ... eee ... is when he hits her with the stick .. oo .. is when he pushes her out of the house ... It's a tale of unending horror .. unrelieved darkness ... blinding darkness." (WCS, 234)

About the title of the play, Poile Sengupta writes, "Alipha- the title was inspired by 'aliph', the first letter of the Hindu alphabet and reminiscent of the word 'alphabet' itself.." (WCS, 215) The sounds of the Hindi alphabet are representatives of the sounds of our daily speaking and reactions. "Aa..ee..eee..oo" these sounds can come from our mouths at the time of learning the alphabet, at the time of pain, and at the time of pleasure too. The title "Alipha" is present throughout the play as we can find the alphabetic sounds as the pain in the case of Woman when she was beaten by her Aunt and as the sexual pleasure in the case of Man. Later on, when Woman grows up and becomes a teacher, the same sounds are now the teaching sounds of Hindi vowels to students like Aa,ee,eee,oo and so on. These different symbolic implications of the alphabets are beautifully implemented by the writer.

Woman observes the difference in the teaching of Hindi vowels between children and adult women. The sounds of these alphabets remind the women of their 'never coming out' condition of slavery in their families and society; their physical and psychological torments, their forceful involvement in sex, and many more things which can tear apart any person physically, mentally, and emotionally. This miserable life of women is summarized through these words of Woman in the play:

“Asma! How unhappy these women are! What a miserable life they lead. It’s not just poverty. That’s bad enough. It’s also the rules that they have to follow ... because they are women. So many rules. Keep your legs closed ... keep your mouth shut. Don’t dress up too much because a man will get attracted to you. Don’t make demands because the man might get angry with you. Don’t wear scent. Don’t let the Jasmine dangle in your hair. Don’t swing your hips like a prostitute. Don’t smile. Don’t laugh.” (WCS, 233)

About the significance of the title “Alipha”, Shashi Deshpande avers in the introduction of the play:

“*Alipha* too deals with words, though less with a specific language than with the power of words, with empowerment through learning. The teaching of the Indian alphabet through corresponding sounds that are distilled human emotions- pain, fear, surprise, pleasure etc- is fascinating. A powerful, if a dark play, *Alipha* also brings in a feminist perspective more positively than the earlier plays did.” (WCS, xiii)

The play is full of mythological references when the different characters of the play are compared with different characters of ancient Indian epics to show that we can find the same affinity in the behaviour of persons and circumstances irrespective of time and place. Woman started writing textbooks of simplified stories from the epics. She was glad to see that the women of Anganwadi were coming out from their dark illiterate state and that’s why they started questioning the negative or unfavourable things around them. One example is the doubting of the character of Gandhari in *Mahabharata*. Gandhari was a queen who blindfolded herself because she found that she had to marry a blind man. According to these newly educated women of Anganwadi, “She (Gandhari) was stupid. She should have kept her eyes open and helped her husband with the kingdom. Blindfolding is just a way of escape.” (WCS, 235) This is what the people of Indian society do- blindfolding them to escape from the evils of society. Poile Sengupta asserts to Dr. Anita Singh in an interview: “My women characters live in a troubled, patriarchal world but they are strong and capable of speaking and acting for themselves.”

Man is already compared with Ravana due to his red eyes by Woman in the beginning. But when the Aunt died and the anger of Man heightened due to his dissatisfaction, he wanted to take revenge on everyone around him. He compared himself with Shakuni of *Mahabharata* having the same spirit of hatred and revenge. Man’s father lost his authority and position with time as a politician and Man took over his place, so the power is also in his hand now. He took revenge on DSP for transferring him to a remote place. He threatened the postmaster so much that he died of a heart attack. The pride of power and unquenchable greed engulfed him: “So there I was ... the modern Shakuni ... the successful Shakuni. I had conquered all my enemies... Finally. The world was at my command ... the men in the palm of my hand. They were like human dice ... I could set them up ... I could throw them down ... I could do what I bloody liked with them.” (WCS, 234- 235) These lines of Man are echoing the lines of false pride of the major villains of Indian epics, which had become the main reason for their killing and downfall.

Another reference to Hindu mythology can be seen when a woman was caught stealing groceries and milk from the kitchen of Anganwadi. Woman compared her with Shurpanakha of *Ramayana* when her eyes were fuming after listening to the speech of Man who was addressing against her to get the favour of the public for his next elections. Woman explains to Asma why she is referring to so much Hindu mythology:

“I suppose it’s because all these stories are a part of me. My religion gives me a God for every occasion ... every mood ... every life stage. ... We do it because we feel everything is God ... there’s nowhere where he is not. All the abundance of life is him ... all the essence of life is also him. My religion shows me the abundance...” (WCS, 238)

Though Man gave a speech against the girlfriend of Babu (the thief woman) to get the favour of the public for his next elections, the very next moment, he favoured her at the back by giving her money and support as Bahu was one of his loyal companion in evil deeds. The drama moves towards a tragic end when Man observes the same Jasmine fragrance after meeting with Woman and got excited as it was the same alluring fragrance of the dead Aunt. Burning with revenge, Babu killed Devi who complained against his girlfriend and eloped. After this incident Woman, who was a supporter of Devi, could feel something dangerous approaching her too. She mentions this fear in her last letter to Asma:

“Dear Asma... I am writing this in a great hurry so that it can catch the afternoon post. What you read in the papers is true. Devi is dead ... the factory is closed. ... I have to get support. I have to. Pray for me, Asma ... to the God who sees everything. Bye, my love.” (WCS, 239-240)

Just after writing this letter, Woman was killed by Man. After killing Woman, Man found her diary and read it. He was restless about the consequences just like an evil person feels after doing any wrong deed. He was planning his actions for the next day when he would be lamenting over the death of Woman in public so that none could suspect him. He was thinking that perhaps nobody had seen him killing Woman so he need not be afraid. But just then, Asma enters. This is how poetic justice can be seen at the end of the play, also symbolic of the story of Rama and Ravana which Woman believed throughout her life. The wickedness of Man reached its peak so he must be destroyed by the good forces of the world.

Poile Sengupta, therefore, aims to rise of the consciousness of an entire culture. Right from childhood, beliefs and attitudes were held in perpetuating an inferior position for women. Some of these are defined in stereotypical roles in text/religious books, unequal pay for equal work, and the traditional division of labour within the family. Sengupta envisages profound changes in traditional social structures, such as the family, in the economic role and power of women, and finally in the fundamental attitudes and personal relationships, leading to just social order.

To conclude, the play claims its success through the minute details of the external and internal depiction of characters and the connection on both levels with the audience. In the words of Poile Sengupta: “The play touches on small town politics, on the efforts of activists in the development process, on the social and economic inequality. But these issues are the backdrop to human emotions- love, lust, greed, anger, hate and revenge. In *Alipha*, ultimately, it is the personal tragedy of the characters, the waste of human endeavour, which is paramount.” (WCS, 215)

References

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