

Dualism is the pillar of JB Priestley's theatrical work

Dr. Rajesh Kumar

Lecturer, Department of English, RNP College, Pandaul, Madhubani, Bihar, India

Abstract

Several scholars and critics have made a point that Priestley was influenced by theatre because of its dual nature. This dualism is very important because Priestley considered that theatre was a source of enjoyment for the people as well as it tried to educate them. Social and contemporary issues were highlighted in the theatre. It compelled the audience to think analytically about the prevalent actions going in the society. From 1918 to 1930's there was a periodical increase of new plays in theatres. It achieved the zenith in 1950's as new society popularized theatre all across the country. People started to talk about actor and actress as well as the message spread by theatres in the society. After this period a sudden decrease in quality plays was noticed because of management and ownership of theatres. It was concentrated in fewer hands who worked for profit. As a result fewer quality plays were produced. It had a bad impact on authors like Priestley and he felt that theatres were cheating the audiences.

Keywords: theatre, dual nature, dualism, enjoyment, education, plays, society, audiences, cheating

Introduction

Priestley remarked in 1940's that-

"The economic conditions of theatrical production are appalling, and all the old faults of the English Theatre are strongly in evidence. We are better off because we have created new audiences with a sharp appetite for good drama, and directors, players, and designers are crying out for serious work, and young playwrights by the dozen are dipping or chewing their pens. It is, some of us feel, Now or Never for the English Theatre."^[1]

Priestley believed that English audiences were actually being cheated because theatre started focusing on money. The state also focused on patronizing other forms of art and opened museum as well as galleries. Theatres received less attention from the state. Priestley as a writer was very far ahead from other contemporary writers. In his theatre novels we can find multiple themes like memory and loss, human connectivity and community and many more. In the works like *The Good Companions* we can find people from different social backgrounds and classes. They have been brought together by the author on a single platform. By doing so they are connected emotionally. This evokes a sense of humanity and readers are amused to find such a wonderful creation by the author.

Concept of Dualism

We all understand that Priestley believes in compassion, love as well as reason. In his writings we can find out the taste of compassion and love based upon reasoning. Someone can argue that passion and rational approach are the two opposite sides of the same coin. How both of the feeling can be put together? Later we will find that Priestley has used both these concept beautifully in his theatre novels. To understand this we will have to see the influence of theatre on Priestley. He was highly motivated by the theatre life. These theatre life experiences can be easily noticed in his writings. In early 1930's Priestley started earning in theatres. He has written about this experience in his *Letter to*

a Returning Serviceman which came in 1945. This also gave him an insight to grow collective approach of working and we can say that working in theatres influenced him a lot. In novels like *The Good Companions*, *Lost Empires*, and *Jenny Villiers* we can find several internal dialogues which are taken from the theatre experience of the author. It has been mentioned-

"We carry a theatre around with us, and we should enjoy the comedy inside. What goes on in our inner world can soon be turned into an enjoyable comedy if we stop hugging and petting our injured vanity, our jealousy and envy."^[2]

We can also notice that horrors of war are reflected on the characters of Priestley. The influence of war on the writings of Priestley can be found in the very first reading of his texts. This is one of the ill effects of war that no any sensible man can forget the horrors and pangs of war. The modernists and the post modernists all have written a lot about the horrors of war. The characters of Priestley are optimistic in nature that is why they are in search of better time to come.

I am reminded about the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne who also believed in similar kind of society. It seems that Priestley is influenced by the authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne because there are certain similarities among these two authors of different age. What Plato believed is of a world of reason governed through compassion. Similar kind of feeling is expressed by the authors like Priestley. In the *Republic* the author Plato has mentioned that –

"He contemplates a world of unchanging and harmonious order, where reason governs and nothing can do or suffer wrong; and like one who imitates an admired companion, he cannot fail to fashion himself in its likeness. So the philosopher, in constant companionship with the divine order of the world, will reproduce that order in his soul and, so far as man can, become godlike; though here, as elsewhere, there will be scope for detraction."^[3]

We must not confuse that Plato is referring the above quoted

lines to whom because it is equally applicable to authors like Priestley.

Priestley never mingled personal and professional life together but he wrote his novels on the basis of real life experiences. Thus, his art of characterization is also unique. We can find a variety of characters in his novels and they are not stereotype. Apart from these findings we cannot forget the remark of Virginia Woolf because she has condemned Priestley as a tradesman of letters-

"At the age of 50 Priestley will be saying 'why don't the highbrows admire me? It isn't true that I only write for money.' He will be enormously rich; but there will be that thorn in his shoe-or so I hope. Yet I have not read, & I daresay shall never read, a book by Priestley....And I invent this phrase for Bennet & Priestley 'the tradesman of letters'."^[4]

The dismissal of Priestley by Virginia Woolf can have several reasons like class snobbery or rising popularity of new writers in the society. Tom was the name of the son of Priestley and he has also witnessed that his father was a victim of class snobbery. It can be said that the critical reception of J.B. Priestley as a novelist was influenced by so many reasons and it cannot be found in textbooks. A new Literature was in demand by the new critics after 1918. This new literature emerges out from a new class which was not represented by writers like Priestley. He was a gifted and intellectual writer but unfortunately financially he was not sound enough to make his name counted in the so called new class. In his writings we can find the taste of modern writers. His writings have influenced several young writers of not only Britain but all across the world.

Utopian Society

Priestley also supported this demand of time because he understood the changing society. He has also written time plays in which he has used flash forward and other techniques. By doing so he was not alone but he was supported by writers like Clive Barker. He has pinpointed the cultural significance of nonlinear time theories where present, past and future was merged together. It has also been said that time is predestined but a question arises that if time is predestined how can we be responsible for our own deeds or action. Thus there is a type of dichotomy between the sense of being and becoming. Sense of being can be understood as an uncontrolled passion whereas sense of becoming can be understood as a controlled and rational approach which can be termed as planned action. It clearly means that the sense of being is unplanned. David Harvey has said in 1990 that-

"the opposition between Being and Becoming has been central to modernism's history... seen in political terms as a tension between the sense of time and the focus of space Even under conditions of widespread class revolt, the dialectic of Being and Becoming has posed intractable problems. Above all, the changing meaning of space and time which capitalism has itself wrought, has forced perpetual re-evaluations in representations of the world in cultural life."^[5]

There is a reflection that the vision of Priestley is utopian in nature because he believes in making the world better for human beings. He once proposed in the BBC broadcasts that a perfect democratic system was needed to make a perfect world for human beings. By taking such measures potential of the individual as well as the society can be felt and

realized. This notion of the author also gives us an idea that the war has reshaped the political circumstances for the world. Following lines are worth mentioning here-

"This has happened before, when a class has newly come into power, and it is now time for it to happen again, but on a much bigger scale... because this time it is not an affair of one class being promoted to power but of the whole class system breaking down, leaving the people free... we are all the people so long as we are willing to consider ourselves the people, so long, in fact, as we put the community before any sectional interests. The collapse of the barriers and disappearance of the ramifications of the class system will act like the blowing up of a dam."^[6]

Thus it becomes clear that during the time of Priestley there were some serious issues like class struggle which is omnipresent. He always thought to make the society free from such problem and for this he tried to do something for individual and society. To understand this utopian vision of Priestley we can also refer to the understanding of Raymond Williams's concept of utopia and dystopia. Raymond Williams was a Welsh Marxist theorist who was very influential. We will not go deeper in this section as it may result in digression from the current work. During the interwar years there were professional plays which dealt on office life where employees worked for the organization and thought for working for the benefit of the self. Apart from such ideology we can also find the ideology of writers like J.B. Priestley who emphasized on a special relationship between individual psychology, personal ideology and professional life. He also cared for cultural transformation. This is one of the reasons that the political scene in the works likes *Bees on the Boat Deck* is termed as farcical comedy. If human efforts were wasted for no reasons then it was criticized by Priestley. This is why he criticized the economic planning based on human expediency. For critics like Gareth Lloyd Evans the political analysis of Priestley is like a comic framework in which there are several contradictions. It is interesting to note here that in 1790 William Blake wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that no progress can be witnessed without contrary. Blake was a romantic poet and for him the word contradiction meant a lot. Political message can have several interpretations and Priestley was a kind of author who always wrote for the society. There can be political interpretations of his work but Blake's point of view that progress needs contrary is certainly applicable to him. We can also not deny that there is a powerful relationship between progress and contradictions. Gareth Lloyd Evans has also noted a very important comparison between Priestley and Chekhov. There are certain parallels between *Eden End* and *The Cherry Orchard*. In both the plays we can find a sense of disintegration and collapse. Apart from collapse and disintegration we can also find the plays like *The Good Companions* as musical-

"I was not concerned directly with The Good Companions as a musical... but of course I took a semi-paternalistic interest in it. The music and lyrics by André Previn and Johnny Mercer seemed to me... very good indeed, quite exceptional; and if they were coolly received by some sections of the press, I think it was because it was thought that two Americans shouldn't be involved in our very English Good Companions. After playing to enormous money at Her Majesty's for some months, it began to slip during the lean weeks after Christmas and was then

whipped off to make room for another musical that proved to be a disaster. Had it been nursed for a few more weeks – as many a long-running musical has been – it would not only have run on and on but would also have been presented overseas. It remains in my mind as an ambitious and loveable musical that deserved more loyalty from its management” [7].

Conclusion

Thus we cannot deny that the age of Priestley challenged the pre conceived notions of the society. People started to accept the new trends and challenge the baseless belief of the traditional society.

References

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