

## ILLUSION AND DELUSION IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *URVASHI O JOHNNY*

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**Abstract:** Indian English drama is a general term that encompasses Indian plays written in English as well as plays produced in local languages and translated into English. In the postcolonial situation, to write drama in English was considered to be politically incorrect because English was considered as the language of the ruler. The art of Indian drama enjoyed a prestigious status in ancient India. However, the practice of Indian drama in spite of its roots in classical traditions was developed only during the British period in India. It was encouraged by Western dramatic influences and also by native theatrical traditions of India. The play *Urvashi O Johnny*, presents a moving account of the dehumanised existence of slum dwellers in Calcutta. She presents a dramatic account of the love affair of Johnny with Urvashi, a talking doll. Johnny, in quest of happiness, escapes the bondages of slums and learns to play with a talking doll, yet his dream of freedom and happiness goes for a toss with the revelation of cancer in medical investigation. As a result he finally fails in his mission and faces his tragic doom which is well dramatised through her play *Urvashi O Johnny* in the following chapter showcasing the moving account of the dehumanised existence of slum dwellers in Calcutta.

**Keywords:** Indian Drama, Calcutta, Dramatic Account, Subaltern.

**Introduction:** Mahasweta Devi in her plays constructs a complex network of marginality, to get at the root of the exploitation and suffering in the society. She dramatises the situations of the exploitation and suffering in the society through the character of Johnny in *Urvashi O Johnny* (1991). The age old existence of oppression, despair, and suffering is common in the lives of the marginalized classes across countries and continents. Literature of the marginalised or subalternity is a major area of the contemporary postcolonial modern studies which is very relevant to the study of Comparative Literature. It is quite interesting to notice that there is a considerable number of writers in Postcolonial literature who have made a commendable contribution to the expansion and blossoming of Postcolonial literature. These writers have taken-up and handled the issues related to the present and how they are connected to the past. The significant feature common to these writers is that the issues dealt with by these writers are very much connected to the heart of the common man. The subject matter of the Postcolonial writers is regarded as a hot commodity of the present literary scenario. The elements of marginalisation, exploitation and other elements related to social inequality are placed in the structure of Postcolonial writings. Social disparity and discrimination prevail in the form of hierarchy where one occupies the dominant position and other is condemned to the lowest subaltern level. Mahasweta Devi lends voice to the voiceless by revealing several hidden types of subjugation

which are very much deep rooted in the Indian social hierarchy and firmly battles for their legitimate rights. Mahasweta Devi shows a different kind of move to highlight the oppression standing apart from other women writers. The women writers before her adopted traditional method of dealing with gender subjugation and other binary elements related to middle and upper class women. But with regard to Devi's works, the thrust is on the living conditions of working class people and their exploitation through the clutches of zamindars, landlords and moneylenders. Therefore, such works are recognized for their authentic portrayals of characters like that of the prostitute Moti in the play *Urvashi O Johnny* (2002). The class repression deepens in the play *Urvashi O Johnny* that traces the travails of Johnny the poor orphan, his flight from the orphanage in quest of fortune as a ventriloquist, his manic obsession with Urvashi, his marionette, his failure to secure success owing to throat cancer and his daunting struggle to survive amidst all these obstacles. The suppression of the marginalised sections is very much reflected in the topics that Mahasweta Devi chooses to give literary space to. The intolerant attitude of the upper class, exploitation of the disadvantaged sections, the Machiavellian strategy of the landed gentry to deny the lower sections of their rights, and the caste system – all find expression in her works. Devi uses the literary devices of irony, sarcasm, criticism as well as colloquialisms to articulate her outrage against society in her works as she highlights the evils and hypocrisy prevalent

in the society. What is inherent in Mahasweta Devi's literary and activist works is how she connects the idea of oppression to history, mainly the people's movements against suppression and corruption. The chronological situations and events recorded in history like the Partition and political movements like the Quit India Movement, Dalit and Naxalite Movement, Women's Movement and the Tebhaga Peasant Movement are deeply entrenched in her writings. Mahasweta's play *Urvashi O Johnny* projects the graceless life of a downtrodden person, held captive under the smooth and levelled grounds, prepared by the privileged sections of society. It also explains how mistreatment and disregard have reduced people to a level of subhuman existence. The strength of Mahasweta Devi symbolizes her sympathetic crusade through art and activism to enable the weaker sections of people to find a just and honourable place in India's mainstream, national life. The condition of the weaker sections during emergency was pathetic. They were the most vulnerable, marginalized and suppressed community in the country. These people have suffered centuries of discrimination and exploitation and even today, in spite of legislation to safeguard them in a fast growing urbanised society, they are still the victims of extensive prejudice, discrimination and violence.

By presenting the character of Johnny, she explains how the urban conditions discarded the privileges of a young individual like Johnny. Mahasweta Devi considers drama a more serious instrument of expression and representation to deal with certain issues which the men playwrights have failed to do. She has adopted the genre as a more realistic means to highlight the present serious familial, social, cultural and political issues, the grievous, dastardly crimes and practices of the society in a satirical way. Her objective is to bring about a realisation of certain harsh realities, to preserve every individual's basic rights, to live freely, and to respect every individual irrespective of different gender caste or creed.

Unlike her other plays, this play moves back to the urban society exploring the hidden realities of life lived on the streets. It projects the dehumanised survival of the slum-dwellers in Calcutta and shows man's brutality and heartlessness to man. It presents both sorrows and joys of the lives on the streets. Class oppression deepens in the play and traces the woes of the poor orphan Johnny. He escapes from the orphanage to seek fortune as a

ventriloquist. He develops a fascination for his talking doll Urvashi. His failure to find success is due to his affliction of cancer and he has struggled to survive amidst all these obstacles. Hence, it becomes a symbolic play that deals with the Emergency period in India. It deals with the love affair of Johnny with Urvashi, a marionette. He is brought up in the slums and longs for happiness and runs away from the slums, to seek happiness for himself and for others like him. Later he decides to entertain the people with his talking-doll tricks. Strangely, he becomes infatuated with his marionette and considers it to be the source of happiness for the audience and a means of livelihood for him. As time passes, he develops a cancer in the throat. His marionette, Urvashi becomes mute as it is the voice of Johnny which she shares to amuse the audience. Johnny's cancer of throat is symbolic of the suppression of democratic rights during the Emergency. For Samik Bandyopadhyay, "*Urvashi O Johnny* is a play for the Emergency" (xiv). The love affair comes to an end as he collapses on the stage at the end of the play. However, it acquires a universality of appeal as it realistically portrays the unending torments to which the poor are subjected. Keeping in mind the horrors of the Emergency which 'plunged the Indian sensibility' into 'shock and pain and utter helplessness', Devi focuses on man's inhumanity to man.

The vivid account of the sorrows and joys in the lives of what could be called the dregs of society is characterized by the playwright's single-minded commitment and passion for the underdog which is an element rarely found in the works of the contemporary writers.

For the setting of the play, she fittingly selected the city of Calcutta one of the progressive cities in the eyes of the Nation. She perhaps thought that the city of Calcutta, a highly developed city of India not only mirrors the urban world but also explores the depth of reality of the lives in the gutters of Calcutta. In this play, Mahasweta Devi explores and exhibits social dissent against the urbanites focussing chiefly on the people, who are engaged in the pursuit of the materialistic pleasure. As a result they have become insensitive and refuse to acknowledge the reality of life. At one level, it is a satire on the educated cosmopolitan society which is well aware of the root causes of the travails of the deprived, goes hand in glove with the Establishment, instead of attempting to lead the people to a better tomorrow. These people with their innate cruelty do not allow the innocent people to live of their

own accord. They, with their hard-heartedness, immorality, pitilessness, and ruthlessness use all inhuman mechanisms to put an end to the joy of the deprived sections.

The voice of these sections is neither recognised nor finds a place in the society. Mahasweta Devi with all her pragmatic knowledge explores the conditions of these sections of people through the character of Johnny, a young boy. He is projected as the protagonist of the play, who wishes to keep every person happy with the art of the puppet show. His puppet is Urvashi with whom he develops a kind of affinity and their artistic bond is almost unbreakable. He developed a kind of mind where he wants to give solace to the needy and the suffering through his puppet shows. All the time he is preoccupied with a passion to take the suffering humanity to a haven of freedom even at the cost of his own life. This fanatic desire made him run away from the orphanage and rededicate himself to giving happiness to the underprivileged through his skill of a puppet show.

Away from his home, Johnny trains himself to be a ventriloquist and ventriloquism becomes his life-long passion. Thereafter, he becomes fascinated by the marionette and takes up ventriloquism as a source of livelihood. As time rolls on, regrettably he develops cancer of the throat – a sudden twist in his life journey. It is interesting to see that Urvashi, the ‘talking doll’ becomes mute because it is the voice of Johnny that she represents all along for the amusement of the audience. The reasons behind his muteness reflect different adverse ramifications of the emergency. His cherished desire to provide amusement to the people till the last minute of his life is suddenly brought to nought. The unexpected twist that took place in the life of Johnny is not applicable to Johnny alone. The fate of Johnny is the fate of every common man who wishes to die for others like a martyr. Perhaps, this is the reason why Mulk Raj Anand in his work *Coolie* conveyed that there are two kinds of people in the world, the rich and the poor, and the twain never come together in their life time.

In fact, the whole thrust here is the release of the human spirit from all sorts of oppression and exploitation. Mahasweta Devi wants even the lowliest who have virtually been denied a decent life and are considered as a burden on the society, to realize his or her freedom. It is through this freedom, that even the subaltern would achieve self-realization. The doctor and Johnny's friends

warn Johnny that he would become dumb if he continued to gab. But he does not give up his profession for he finds in it a form of freedom – a freedom for his joy and joy for others. At the end of the play, he fails to speak when he tries to perform his last show. Samik Bandyopadhyay says that “the cancer of the throat is a metaphor for the suppression of democratic rights which the emergency of 1975 brought” (xiii).

The play brings a live picture of life on the streets of Calcutta. It is a satire on the writers who show fantasy in their writings to amuse people rather than enlightening them. The playwright brings forth an animate and inanimate affair between Johnny and his marionette, Urvashi. Samik Bandyopadhyay comments, “In the animate-inanimate affair, Mahasweta Devi sees desperation, a life and death involvement that demands from the man, commitment more than human and a commitment that eventually proves to be fatal” (xiii). It is the commitment of Johnny which brings him death. As Johnny accepts ventriloquism as a practice to give pleasure and happiness to the communities of the suppressed and the oppressed, he gets attached to his talking doll, Urvashi. He could not imagine himself being away from her. When the doctor warned him not to gab and to be away from Urvashi, he shows his protest: “You are all conspiring to draw me away from Urvashi. I'll drive my knife straight into your heart” (57). Despite the fact that he would face adverse consequences, he is prepared to face all of them happily rather than give up his profession as it provides an outlet for his thoughts and feelings. It is very heartening to see how Johnny, the champion of the suffering brethren, is left with none to support him and how he becomes a non-entity as he loses his voice which he had used to offer to people, at least, a moment of release from the struggles of work-a-day world.

Urvashi O Johnny is essentially a play of social realism. It is used as a literary vehicle to drive home the realistic contemporary situation which we are unaware of. Social realism as theatrical stylization is a striking aspect of Mahasweta Devi's writings because it gives her works a fresh breath of life. About social realism K.A. Abbas observes, “It is the acute awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence the lives of men and women and overall interaction of individual and society” (Abbas, 1975: 5).

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