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A Moral Lesson, Amoral Lesion
Sharon Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident*

PL. Visalakshi M.A., M.Phil.

Varied Themes for All Humanity

Sharon Pollock (born 1936) is a veteran Canadian Playwright with an impressive theatre history. She has worked under various categories such as actor, director, administrator and playwriting instructor. Her themes are varied and range from personal biographic elements and family politics to racism. The unifying factor is that all her plays reflect the social concern that she nurtures towards the common good of, not merely the community or even her nation, but all humanity. This is one trait that sets her apart from the general stream of writers. Her significant contribution to theatre has been recognized in the various awards presented to her (The Governor General's Award for *Blood Relations*, Canada-Australian Literary Award).

Focus on Yester Years

Sharon Pollock, categorically, delves into the incidents of yesteryears purporting to throw light upon the atrocities committed under the cover of enforcements of law. *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976) is one such play. It draws upon the strategic methods employed by the Canadian Government, during the early 1900s to curb the influx of Asian immigrants into their country. Pollack's play is not a mere documentation of the factual happenings; it scans the emotions of the people involved - both the inflicted and the afflicted, thus acquiring a laudable depth. It is but inevitable that human beings tend to act in their best interests, however, the play seems to suggest that a humanitarian attitude is the dire need of the hour.

Cycle or Recycle?

Man has progressed from a barbaric state, acquired modesty and become civilized. The norms of nature proclaim that everything on earth predominantly falls into a cycle. So, if man's unkind activities are left unchecked / unkempt, perhaps he may be destined to reach that degenerated state. The play, by nature of its intent is for all times and can, over and above arresting the attention of the audience irrespective of their geographical locations, set them on an introspective mode. As a playwright, Pollack feels that this is her responsibility to society¹.

The Heroic Journey

In 1914, the **Komagata Maru**, a Japanese steamer carrying 376 prospective immigrants of Asian Origin was forbidden to disembark its passengers by Canadian officials with vested interests. This incident forms the back drop of the play. The difficulty of the enactment of an incident of such magnitude, with a cast of six characters, is surmounted by making T.S (the Master of Ceremonies) don the role of various government officials and by the constant presence of the 'woman', a representative of the Asian immigrant.

The Split Selves of Human Beings

The play projects the prejudiced racist attitudes of the white men who are themselves settlers in the vast terrain of Canada. The character of Inspector William Hopkinson is meticulously employed to expose the split selves of human beings. He is a civil servant pledged to his service but only superficially. Beneath the tough exterior, a soft corner does exist and this does surface periodically. However, both sides always oppose each other fighting for supremacy. Hopkinson is himself half Asian by descent but he fervently refuses to acknowledge that.

Robert C. Nunn, commenting on the dualism present in Hopkinson, supports this view, thus -- "His racism is practiced only through constant and strenuous denial of a part of himself" (30). This is because he is led to believe that the Asians are an inferior race and without the courage to combat, he joins the band wagon of racist groups:

HAMILTON. All I know, Evy, is my father didn't die in the service for the world to be overrun by a second-rate people.

EVY. You don't make sense. Who's second-rate when you run out of brown people? (Pollock 248-49)

Questions Relating to Lineage – The Peace of the Coffin

On the one hand, he beseeches Evy, his mistress, to stop when she confronts him about his lineage. He is enraged at the mention of his mother's Oriental origin because he is shameful of his inheritance. Yet, on the other hand, he praises the Indians for their precision in artefact craftsmanship. Therefore we see that his denial is in itself a proof of the existence of another dimension to his 'self'. This becomes ever more evident in his numerous trips to the temple

when he is "all dolled up" (Pollock 267) as a Sikh. His awakening to the existence of the other self is gradual and runs parallel to the deteriorating state of his dominant self.

After over five weeks since the forced departure of the steamer he feels no sense of achievement or pride of accomplishment. Then, he only longs for a certain something which eludes him, leading him to believe in the "peace of the coffin" (Pollock 285). Later, peace does embrace him; only that when it does, Hopkinson has already been engulfed into the fold of the All Pervasive Destroyer - Shiva (of Hindu Mythology) through the bullets from Mewa Singh's gun.

Hopkinson projects the cause of the imminent racism present in society to the effect that an awareness is created amongst the reader/audience; however, the total impact of the atrocity permeates them with the stinging words and obnoxious behaviour of T.S., who represents the government officials of the times.

Racial Prejudices

T.S's outlook of the Sikhs who are of an East Asian origin is pathetic:

T.S. He is criminally inclined, unsanitary by habit, and roughish by instinct....His intelligence is roughly that of aborigines. He indeed belongs to a heathen and debased class.(Pollock 249)

His views are deep-rooted --- he ascertains that the cause of employment, racial tension, high interest rates, and violence in the streets to the presence of the "coloured immigrant" (Pollock 258). This very term displays the biased temperament of the speaker.

Suffice to say that while immigrants are welcome to populate the vast expanse that is Canada and to enjoy her riches the entry of the coloured immigrant should be kept in check, "the operative word's "a few"" is T.S.'s verdict. The strategy is to let them toil, undertake menial jobs and there ends their limit. The coloured immigrant's free movement and mingling within the community was objectionable and highly undesirable.

Mere Beings, Just Commodities

T.S's views are clearly racist and devoid of any finer feelings for fellow human beings. According to him the people aboard the liner are mere beings, just commodities, the fate of whom can be signed-off according to their relative worthiness. Their untold suffering and the hardships that they undergo are not lost on the audience. Although they do not form part of the cast, their presence is felt throughout the play in the person of the Woman.

The Woman

The Woman, along with the unseen child, reflects the sentiments of the victims aboard. Her dialogues are interspersed, pin pointing to the changing temperaments, of those aboard.

At the beginning of the play it is joy upon sighting land; then, it is dejection upon witnessing the launch being stopped and with the issuance of the order to deport; later it becomes hope.

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Her reassurance to the child rests on her faith that they, as British subjects, would come to no harm. However, as time passes her hope wavers.

Though stranded on the stagnant slip, unable to endure famine she remains strong --- imbibing strength from the thought of her heritage. She does not turn bitter although she results the ugliness of the people ashore the beautiful Vancouver. Sadness overwhelms her but this matures, with her acquired bravery, into a conviction.

This becomes explicit in her concluding statement that God shall judge injustice with a heavy hand. Pradip Lahiri holds up this character as the symbolised Mother-India figure (183). Indeed just as the Woman is caged behind, in the rear of the stage justice for the ethnic minorities too remains confined to a cage.

Great Passion for Fellow Human Beings

The instance of a playwright projecting a social consciousness may not be uncommon but what marks Pollock's endeavour is the magnitude of her passion for fellow human beings. Unlike George Ryga or Tomson Highway she does not belong to the afflicted class yet her desire is tuned to stop such atrocities.

Moreover the subtle manner, in which the objective facts and subjective emotions are interwoven, without a blatant thrust of personal views, synthesizes pragmatism. The revisitation of history is with the conscientious effort to subvert the myth of Canadian moral superiority impressing that political machinations usurp individual rights.

Pollock's Project and Program

Pollock states her purpose explicitly in a programme not for the first production of the play:

To know where we are going, we must know where we have been and what we have come from. Our attitudes towards the non-white peoples of the world and of Canada is one that suffers from the residue effects of centuries of oppressive policies which were given moral and ethical credence by the fable of racial superiority.... The attitudes expressed by the general populace of the time, and paraphrased through the play, are still around today, and until we face this fact, we can never change it. (Nothof 88).

She continues this sentiment, "All of my plays deal with the same concern It's a play about an individual who is directed to or compelled to follow a course of action of which he or she begins to examine the morality".² (quoted.in Nothof 83)

Prioritizing Morality

Morality is to be prioritized over and above other necessary concerns if betterment of society be the goal of mankind. The plight of the Sikh minorities evokes sympathy, destroys apathy and ignites a pithy passion to uphold human rights. Documenting an event of the past is never capable of evoking an impact; it is the emotions of the people on whose lives the

historical incident had such an impact that moves the audience impelling them to don their thinking caps and act accordingly.

Notes

1. For a sampling of materials that reflect Pollock's views see Page 12, 18 ; and Walker 142.
2. Rudakoff, Judith and Rita Much. *Fair Play : 12 Women Speak*. Toronto : Simon and Pierre. 1990.

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