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MINORITY SPEAKS FOR/AGAINST ITSELF: A READING OF BAHARUL ISLAM'S PLAY
JATRA

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ABSTRACT

One of the emerging voices that speak of the minority in an unbiased way in Assam is Baharul Islam. Baharul Islam, a playwright, director and actor attempts to dismantle the marked identity of the marginalised (in the present context woman or Islam) from a judicious perspective. His sceptical attitude towards certain set of people who misinterpret religion and treat women as biologically and religiously inferior have earned him much admiration around the globe. One of his most celebrated plays Jatra speaks of a Muslim woman who is trapped in limbo by biological as well as religious misinterpretations. It is very interesting to note how Baharul Islam amalgamates gender and religion together to bring forth his cynicism on people who have ignorantly considered themselves authorities for preaching the religion and advocating gender hierarchies. He reinstates the position of Islam as well as women in Islam. In a place like Assam, which is known for its polyglot society and heterogeneous culture, reinstating the position of Islam and the position of women in Islam has to negotiate with diverse sociological strategies. Islam yet held as "minority", looked as the "other" with its internal discrepancies projected through the words of false interpreters further reduces the possibilities of breaking the manifested image of "minority". Baharul Islam attempts to deconstruct the same. Hence, in this case, it becomes difficult to comprehend who is the minority? The complex network of various socio-cultural strategies that partake in forming an identity whether of Islam or of being a woman can never be ignored in such cases. And this is very skilfully presented in the present play Jatra by Baharul Islam.

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The Constitution of India uses the term "minority" in Articles 29 to 30 and 350A to 350B. According to Article 29, minority is any section of citizens having distinct language, script and culture. Article 30 talks of two categories of minority based on religion and language. Article 350 talks of only linguistic minority. In a debate on "minority", NinongEring the minister of state for minority affairs tells the RajyaSabhathat Constitution does

not define "minority". The National Commission of Minorities Act (1992) declares five communities —Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis—as religious minorities.

In an interesting case *TMA Pai Foundation & Others vs. the State of Karnataka and Others*¹, the Supreme Court states its principle that "minority status should be determined in relation to the population of the state and not to whole India. Both religious and linguistic minorities have to be state specific."

The present play *Jatra* presents two kinds of minority— one that the National Commission of Minorities Act has recognised as the religious minority and the other that over the ages the so called *human civilisation* has categorised as the "fair sex" based on gender discrimination. *Jatra* is a devoted play on the issue of minority scripted by someone who falls into the categorisation of minority and who speaks about the ways minority gets interpreted/gazed by the so called ministers or preachers of the religion very strategically strengthening the formation of the other kind of minority based on the gender discrimination within the complex network of the gazes of the so called "larger" minority. Islam makes an attempt to destroy such "minority" that is powerfully constructed by the "epistemological and ontological regimes" that "make them appear natural" calling forth "resistance" and "change". (Jagger, 2008: 18)

The rigid structures of the epistemological and ontological regimes which have made the gender based gaze unperturbedly construct the identity of women as an object of desire has been depicted by Islam in the journey of Rabeya's and Sakitan's life. Mere imposition of patriarchy juxtaposed with religion has pushed the women in the community to the margins. This is evident in the way Hannan treats his wife Rabeya. The way Islam uses the gaze in *Jatra* inevitably brings out the exploitation of women that the male/female hierarchy has long encouraged. Male sexuality is explicit at the stake of female sexuality. Islam powerfully criticises and questions the self-proclaimed authorities of the religion who have taught the words of the *Holy Quran* to the people who did not get the chance to educate themselves. The class of people Islam chooses is the class which has known not any formal education except for what the *maulvi* or the *jonab* tells them. Basically, the men take his words as the words of God and the final words. The maulvi in the present context have manipulated the verses of the *Holy Quran* and is busy visiting people where he is blindly celebrated as the religious authority. On a closer look, the scene where the maulvi is present in Hannan's house shows the ways in which the maulvi tries to satiate the lustful desires of the men by promising them of having hundred angels after their death in heaven.

Islam points towards the danger of being ignorant in letters. Under such circumstances what can fill in the gaps of ignorance. The self-claiming manipulative authorities of the religion start by reinstating the gender difference by proclaiming that God favours men to women and deliberately practise the sub-ordination of women through tools such as voyeurism. Islam helps in visualising the body of the woman as an object of desire through the intersection of the male gazes on the same body as the example of Rabeya reveals towards the end of the play.

Rabeya the central character of the play is Islam's powerful agent who introspects into her life and helps her sister Sakitan to reflect on her life. But the question is even if one is out from the complex network of the suppression that the self-proclaimed authorities of the religion have strategically constructed, is a woman ever out of the gender hierarchy even after forsaking her relationships with her husband through *talaq*?

In Rabeya's case it is evident that manipulated religious dictums are just a facet of the layers of exploitation that a woman inescapably undergoes. The gaze of Hannan and the maulvi symbolise the lustful gazes of the men on women. This can also be interpreted as one "minority" gazing the "other". Although Rabeya gets separated from her husband Hannan after he utters "talaq, talaq, talaq" to her, she is still exploited by the men outside her community. This is seen in the way a man approaches her in the station while she is selling the firewood.

When the play begins we find Rabeya being abused by her sister for not having a husband:

Sakitan: You don't have a husband. And for these three years who knows how many men you've slept with. (Scene II, 6)

And a little later Sakitan compares her situation with Rabeya:

Sakitan: Yet, I am happy because I have my husband to stand by me. (Scene II, 7)

But then yields to Rabeya that she had been ill-treated by her husband.

Sakitan: (*As if a change occurs in her. Comes and sits beside her sister Rabeya.*) That bloody old vulture.... doesn't let me sleep the whole night...doesn't care whether I am willing...even during those these.....so hungry Always...this a human bodythe whole night...(*starts crying*) (Scene II, 7)

Rabeya: Yes, I don't have a husband. So what? And you, so proud of your husband! *Arre*, Earning with my own hands. Managing my food myself. I am free. I have a World of my own. I am free. (Scene II, 8)

The instance where Sakitan narrates about her drudgeries of life to Rabeya highlights Islam's staunch criticism on how women are treated by men in matrimonial relationships. On the contrary, *The Holy Quran* objects on the forceful subjugation of women and violence of such kind on women.

"O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry you have given them - except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike something and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good."

(The Holy Quran, 4:19)

Rabeya consoles her sister and celebrates her freedom thereafter. She celebrates her bondage free life but how far she is really free is questioned by the playwright a little later. Rabeya goes back to her past life and the play proceeds in the flash back mode. Rabeya's remembrance also throws light on the kind of society she belongs to. Women are shown as a community within a community—a minority within a minority. They talk everything that is private and there is no concealing of anything that is sexual.

Rabeya: Wahida, what news? How many months?

Wahida: Three months.

Rabeya: How old is the other girl?

Wahida: One year.

Rabeya: What? One year! Then your husband is really something.

Fatima: Oi, listen, something really interesting.

All: What? What?

Fatima: How long is it Amina got married? That day I saw she is pregnant. The way she walked getting down the rickshaw!!

(She mimes. All laughs.)

Salma: Wait a little. I too have something to say.

Sakitan: O, she too has something to say. Listen...

Salma: That Pakija in front of our shop and that Anup the street crossing...

Sakitan: O, that *lambu*, that Hindu...

Salma: Yes. What a show! Wait in front of the shop and exchanging glances...

(All laughs) (Scene II, 10-11)

On the one hand, Islam shows the women community comfortably talking and celebrating their authorized lives and on the other, he shows the temptations Hannan in the presence of the particular maulvi who has come down to visit Hannan's place and preach on spirituality and religion. The maulvi catches Hannan's lustful gazes and reminds him of what is waiting for him in the Heaven:

(*A young girl comes in, tries to lift the bundle of firewood lying near Hannan but drops it again. The song stops. Hannan gathers her Sunni lying on the ground and gives it to her. The girl smiles at him coyly. The maulvi notices.*)

Maulvi: (*Clearing his throat*) O HannanBhai, You'll get. You'll also get. In *bahesta* you'll get women thousand times more beautiful than her. You'll get un-smelt, untouched *huris*. (Sc II, 14)

The maulvi talks of “un-smelt, untouched huris” who will be given to men once they are in heaven rendering women to the status of an object and thereby making them mere objects of possession. This the Holy Quran objects. The doctrines of the Holy Quran are somewhat like this (just to quote a few):

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (The Holy Quran, 33:35)

It clearly talks of “forgiveness and reward” but the maulvi’s interpretation in the play extends beyond the required interpretation. The Holy Quran has not specified what the “reward” is but here the maulvi is emphatically specific about the rewards “un-smelt, untouched huris”.

Such being the points of Islam’s criticisms, he compels one to revisit the ways in which the *Holy Quran* is misinterpreted and misconstrued. Islam questions the misinterpretation of the *Holy Quran* and questions the chastity of men over women. The closing scene shows Hannan asking Rabeya to purify herself by spending a night with the Jonab so that Hannan can again get married with Rabeya. Maulvi explains the essence of a woman being pur while she sits for marriage:

Maulvi: (to Hannan) Come, come here. You could not make her understand a simple thing. Come here. (*Approaching Rabeya*) Listen Rabeya, when a man wants to remarry the wife he has given Talak, she need to sit in nikah with another man to cleanse herself.

The man she sits in nikah purifies her and then she can remarry the earlier husband. This is the rule of the Shariat. Strange! Being a Muslim woman you don’t know these. (to Hannan) You could not make her understand. Now go, I’ve made her understand everything.

(Hannan approaches Rabeya submissively.)

Hannan: Just see, how Jonab has made everything clear to you. Jonab is a good man. It’s just a matter of one night. Being the husband I am not worrying, why should you be so...go...go now.

(*Rabeya is beside herself. She stares at Hannan for a few moments and she goes near the maulvi. The maulvi says lustily.*)

Maulvi: come, it’s just a matter of one night.

(*Rabeya looks a while and spits on maulvi’s face. The maulvi’s reaction is first of shock and then of rage.*)

Maulvi: *Bajaariurat!* You spat on my face. Spat on a Jonab’s face. I’ll see to it. I’ll see how you sell firewood in this market. You’ve not spat on me but at the whole Muslim society. I’ll see you. I’ll gather people. And Hannan, I’ll see you too. You’ve insulted me.

(Scene VII, 36, 37 and 38)

Rabeya’s action is an ending to the subjugation that she had faced as a woman under the bonds of matrimony. Rabeya’s action is a metaphor for Islam’s scepticism on the misinterpretation of the religion.

Islam speaks for the revival of various ways through which women are exploited in the name of the religion and against the ways in which the *Holy Quran* gets misrepresented by people. Islam urges people to interpret the *Holy Quran* in the way it exists and staunchly criticises the way certain leaders misinterpret and manipulate it. Before he begins writing the play, he states “It is beyond us to make an appraisal of the extent, depth and universal appeal of Islam.” Baharul Islam’s concern as he states remains with the “non-Islamic tendencies in the garb of Islam in the Muslim society of lower Assam....”

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ⁱ*TMA Pai Foundation & Others vs. the State of Karnataka and Others* was on the rights of the minority institutions to admit students from the minority and exercise their autonomy in the case of admission and education. It was decided in due course of time by the various benches who had undertaken the case that minority intake of students should be 50% and not more than that. However, the "minority" in this case pointed to both the linguistic and religious minority belonging to a particular state and not based on the country as a whole.
