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Independence Disguised As Submission: A Critical Analysis Of The Character Of
'Manasi' In Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*

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ABSTRACT

The play *Evam Indrajit* is a milestone in the history of modern Indian drama, depicting the existential angst of an urban, educated, middle-class Bengali man named Indrajit who belonged to the post-independence period of India. Though Indrajit is the protagonist of the play *Evam Indrajit*, it is the character of Manasi who steals the limelight with her subdued presence. The most interesting part of her character is her silent assertion of independence behind a mild and submissive exterior. It is Manasi who influences the direction of the play and the other important characters in the play are defined by her subtle presence. Although she did not have a very powerful presence in the play, her display of strength through the exercise of restraint makes her admirable. The play reveals what she appeared to be and how she was not what she projected herself to be.

Keywords- Social Taboo, Submission, Victim, Choice, Independence.

INTRODUCTION

The play *Evam Indrajit* by Badal Sircar is considered to be a masterpiece of modern Indian drama. It was written in Bengali in the year 1963 and later had been translated into English in 1974 by noted playwright, Girish Karnad. Author Rustom Bharucha calls the play "the *Waiting for Godot* of the Bengali theater" (Bharucha 133). The play is about the existential angst of an urban, educated, middle-class, Bengali man named Indrajit who belonged to the post-independence period of India. Though the play is named after Indrajit and he is the protagonist of the play, it is the character of Manasi who with her silent and subtle presence in the play draws maximum attention. Manasi has a certain mystery and charm about her. She appears to submit to social norms yet is not a victim. Behind her mild exterior lies a highly individualistic persona. A critical analysis of her character reveals the independent side to her personality which is quite contrary to how she has projected herself throughout the play.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Manasi is introduced in the play in the very first act where she sees the plight of the Writer, another character in the play, in trying to write a play and asks him, "Finished (writing)?" (Sircar 3). She seems to understand his situation unlike Auntie, another woman character in the play who is the stereotype of the typical Indian mother and disregards the writer's efforts in trying to create a piece of art and instead yells at

him, "Night and day- scribble, scribble, scribble.....just scribble. Only God knows what will come out of all this scribbling..." (Sircar 3). But Manasi is somebody who takes interest in his writing and her presence is encouraging enough for the Writer to focus on his work. Manasi's interest is evident in the words, "Won't you read out what you have written so far?" (Sircar 3). When the Writer tells her he hasn't written anything and tears up the paper she questioned him back as to why he did such a thing. The Writer clarified that he does not know many people around him about whom he can write. Manasi then directs his attention towards the audience comprising of real people with real problems about whom the Writer should write instead of turning his back on real people to face the wall. Manasi was trying to draw his attention towards the actual scenario from where he can gain inspiration to write a play. It is on Manasi's suggestion that the Writer turns his face towards the audience and tries to look out for the plot of his play from his observations of the lives of people present in the audience. Manasi again comes to enquire about the Writer's progress after he has met four people from the audience namely, Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit, to know whether the writer has found something interesting about their lives which can give him material to formulate the plot of his play. Manasi, through her concern towards the Writer's struggle to find a suitable plot for his play and with her enquiries about his work progress from time to time makes her presence felt in the first part of the play.

It is revealed in the course of the play that the Writer had named her 'Manasi' which was not her real name but he still wanted to call her by that name since Manasi means 'creation of mind'. Manasi was perhaps a character created out of the Writer's imagination in the play in whom he can seek solace and who can keep him motivated towards writing the kind of play he wanted to write. He did not even want to know her real name when Indrajit told him that her real name is not Manasi (Sircar 16). The Writer stood his ground that he is going to call her only by the name he has given her because he treated Manasi as his muse although he never admitted to it in the play. Satyadev Dubey in his 'Introduction' to *Evam Indrajit* referred Manasi to "an Indian counterpart of Jung's *anima*".

Manasi is introduced in the play much before the protagonist of the play Indrajit is, in the very first scene only. Manasi happened to be Indrajit's cousin sister in the play and they were very close to each other. Indrajit himself told the Writer that he liked talking to Manasi and often spent time with her. Indrajit felt that talking to Manasi gave him respite from the useless chatter of people around him mostly about "cricket, politics or literature" (Sircar 17). But with Manasi around him the case was different. Indrajit felt very comfortable discussing everything with Manasi, even things he could not discuss with anybody else because in front of Manasi he did not have the fear of being judged for anything he said. They used to talk mostly about themselves, something that Indrajit preferred more than talking about world affairs. He was free to be himself as he knew that Manasi would accept him the way he is. Manasi was somebody talking to whom made Indrajit feel "happy" and "Light" (Sircar 18).

At one point in the play, Manasi receives a gift from Indrajit after he had passed the examination. She immediately asks him the reason behind his choice of giving a gift to her for she thought it should be her who should gift him something because it is a rule to give present to somebody who has done well in something. Indrajit questions her about it and they start arguing about the nature of rules. Indrajit asked Manasi if she likes to go by rules. In her reply Manasi says that "Girls have to" (Sircar 21). This is when Indrajit questions her back that why it is so that girls have to follow rules all the time even when men can do what they like to do and why are there separate rules for boys and girls and wanted to know further who makes such rules (Sircar 21). Indrajit questions the basis of such rules. Manasi, on the other hand, doesn't understand Indrajit's logic behind not following rules and fighting against them. She is matured enough to understand that she cannot fight with the society to establish her own set of rules and doesn't even know who she has to fight with to break those rules. She is a perfect foil to Indrajit's character in the play. She, unlike Indrajit, has accepted things as they are. She knows that there's no point in trying to bother about the rules imposed by society on individuals because in that process people would head towards complicating their lives more. She was an intelligent woman and knew how to calm Indrajit down with her opinions when he became angry about rules binding individuals in society. She confesses to Indrajit that she rather feels "a sense of pity" towards the state of affairs around her instead of being provoked like Indrajit and also confesses to being "scared" (Sircar 23). Her feeling of being

scared was perhaps a result of the reign of the patriarchal society that demanded a certain amount of obedience from women. Women like Manasi had to succumb to expectations the society had from them in the fear that they might face isolation if they tried to act otherwise. Waliul Alam rightly points out that, "Consciously or unconsciously women are mentally prepared to accept these unethical and vitiated norms of patriarchal society from the very early stage of their life" (Alam 306). Manasi's sense of anger is validated through Indrajit's voicing of his anger in the play for she cannot be angry herself being portrayed as the stereotype of the submissive woman in the play. It is because of Indrajit's "Anger against rules" (Sircar 23) and his questions on rules being different for men and women that Manasi feels a sense of calm within because Indrajit asks those questions about discrimination of rules and vents out his anger on her behalf. She also tells him that, "I feel stronger because of you" (Sircar 24). She accepts the social situation around her as it is, at times does feel disturbed but not angry because she wants to "take life more easily" (Sircar 24) and knows that there's no use in worrying endlessly about situations where she cannot do anything to bring about a change.

Manasi, conscious of her family relationship with Indrajit says "No" to Indrajit when he said he would marry her the day he gets a job (Sircar 24). Manasi reminds him that she is his "first cousin" from his mother's side but that does not stop Indrajit from desiring to marry her for the person she was. Indrajit did not think about the family relation they shared but saw Manasi as an individual who he was compatible with and so he wanted to marry her. For Manasi it was a social taboo and something she could not do. She appeared to be conforming to the rules enforced by society on individuals. Throughout the play Manasi is seen as a submissive woman who couldn't defy her position of being in favor of following societal rules but she is also not a victim because she asserted her choice and her individuality in what she did, just that she was never too vocal about it, never too confrontational and the play shows her to be a tender lady. She did not want to bring disgrace to their family so she stood firm on her decision of not marrying Indrajit. Never for once she said yes to Indrajit's proposals of marriage. She did not give in to the temptation to get married to a man she loved the most but exercised an adequate amount of self-restraint to give more priority to the code of conduct that women were bound to abide by and she did it completely out of choice.

The second act of the play shows that Indrajit now has a job, has travelled to various places across the country for his work and is still unmarried. When the Writer, who met him after a gap of almost seven years, asks him about Manasi, he said that she was "all right", still unmarried and "teaching in a school at Hazaribagh" (Sircar 39). Then Indrajit also tells him that he writes to her occasionally and she also replies and they meet about once in a year in their hometown, Calcutta, thus making it evident that he was still in touch with Manasi despite being away from her for a long time. While interacting with the writer, Indrajit also recalls the day when Manasi had told her that she cannot marry him even though she wanted to because according to her, "Not everything is achieved by mere wanting" (Sircar 40). Manasi had made her stand very clear to Indrajit from the very beginning of the play and continued to stand by it till the very end. This shows her autonomy over her thoughts and dedication towards her own decisions where Indrajit could not do anything to change mind.

In the third act of the play, Manasi tells the Writer that he cannot find a better protagonist for his play than Indrajit owing to the fact that Indrajit was different from Amal, Vimal and Kamal who were too ordinary. At least Indrajit could think in a different way and could question the basis of things. He could dream about a change unlike Amal, Vimal and Kamal who went on living their lives according to a routine, accepting what they have been pushed to accept. Manasi said to the Writer that she believed Indrajit "may find firm earth at the bottom. Then he may start living again" (Sircar 50). When the Writer asks her how she knew so much, Manasi claimed that she doesn't know anything and is "stupid" (Sircar 50), but in reality it is she who gives direction to the Writer's thoughts and also understands Indrajit's state of mind and helped him express his angst by being a good listener to his rants and letting him be who he was. She tries to give her inputs and ideas to help out the Writer in creating the plot of his play. Perhaps her calling herself "stupid" when the Writer asked her how she knew about certain things was her wish to not divulge much about her perspectives about things and to avoid confrontations with the people she cared for. While the Writer and Indrajit remained confused for a long time about various things, Manasi is never confused; she is clear in the head about how

she sees life and what she wants from life. Her facade of submissiveness was perhaps an attempt to cover the independent side of her personality.

The third act also shows Indrajit to be a married man but married to another woman, not the one he loved. Co-incidentally her name is also Manasi. Here Indrajit tells the Writer that despite being married, he is still in touch with Manasi- the Manasi he loved and wanted to marry. He writes to her sometimes and they also meet occasionally in the same place they used to meet earlier- "In that park. Under that tree" (Sircar 54) and they still talk about the same things they used to earlier, that is about themselves. Then there's a flashback where Manasi is seen talking to Indrajit and he tells her about his wife. But Manasi seems to be less interested in hearing about his life with his wife and Indrajit switches the topic to other topics related to him on Manasi's insistence. There is no insecurity here but perhaps Manasi was more interested in knowing about Indrajit, somebody she has known for a long time and not about somebody she doesn't know at all. Here Manasi's meeting with Indrajit even after his marriage and conversing with him comfortably shows how she is not scared of rules, quite contrary to how she projects herself in the play. Here she does not seem to be afraid of the fact that Indrajit has a wife now who might know about their secret meetings and cast doubt on the nature of their relationship. She also did not seem to be afraid of the fact that her relationship with Indrajit after his marriage was not socially acceptable and could be labeled as an objectionable act by society. But these questions did not bother her or stop her from meeting Indrajit. This proves that Manasi was not afraid of social taboos but rather afraid of commitment and did not want to be bound by rituals to save a relationship. While friendship with Indrajit remained a need for her she did not want to possess him to fulfill her need.

The last part of the play shows Indrajit and Manasi engaged in a serious conversation. Indrajit tells Manasi how he finds it difficult to accept life as it is and wants to quit treading the path to which Manasi replies "You have to go on walking" (Sircar 55). She reminds him that "There is no escape" (Sircar 55). Manasi keeps on motivating him to be optimistic and not lose hope on life. The play ends with Manasi joining the Writer and Indrajit and standing between them and saying the same words about walking the road despite facing disappointments, along with them which closes the play. Manasi seems to be a practical person who understands and can distinguish between illusion and reality and thus suggests that Indrajit should give up living in the illusory world and accept the real world for what it is (as revealed to the Writer) as it is the real world he has to live in because of its permanence. She is aware of the troubles that life has to offer but still swears by moving ahead by walking the road, which is the most prominent message that the play gives out. She knows there is no choice and is prepared to live with whatever comes by her way unlike Indrajit, who is restless and loses patience quite easily. Quite contrary to Indrajit's nature, Manasi had a calm demeanor and placed her points with utmost poise. Anjum Katyal was of the opinion that Manasi's "quiet resigned acceptance of a woman's lot is as old as the Ramayana. This is an image, a construct, of woman that has persisted in the popular imagination: the long-suffering, self-sacrificing figure who never rebels against an unfair society but resolutely fulfils the role expected of her. She is meant to be a figure of admiration" (Katyal 197).

In the play, Manasi is portrayed as an educated, urban woman who is at par with Indrajit in terms of intellect. Manasi could match up to Indrajit's mental standards and that's why he could feel free to talk to her about everything. She breaks the notion that men can only be intelligent. Sircar did not see Manasi as somebody who is weaker than the Writer or Indrajit in terms of their mental capabilities. He gave equal status to all of them and that's why she was pitted against them in the play. Manasi becomes catalytic in the development of the plot and her presence is valued because it enhances the creativity of the writer and analytical skills of Indrajit. The Writer as a spokesperson of the playwright, Badal Sircar, crafted the character of Manasi to fulfill his intellectual cravings and be guided through in his journey as a playwright by an inspirational figure. Her name itself means 'creation of mind'. She was the source of inspiration for the Writer and could provide a balance to Indrajit's conflicted ideas. She was endowed with an incredible power of acceptance and could calm Indrajit down by offering him her perspectives on life. She made life easier for Indrajit being his biggest confidante. Manasi was the worthy friend to Indrajit in whom he could confide in everything that was going on in his mind. But at the same time, Manasi can be seen as an example of a modern

woman who is way ahead of women of her times. At that time and age when women were still grappling with domestic issues, Manasi had a career of her own as a teacher. She had an independent mind and led a life governed by her own choices- choice to love Indrajit and not marry him, choice to have a career of her own, choice to meet him after his marriage, choice to remain unmarried. She was a woman with an individualistic bent of mind though she was conscious of the social and cultural norms that surrounded her. Women of her times could not recognize those norms thrust on them but rather considered it to be a natural thing for women to take care of domestic activities. Manasi, on the other hand, was realistic enough to understand her position as a woman in society but not accept everything that would be thrown on her. While the play tries to depict the fact that Manasi refused to marry Indrajit in fear of being judged by society for her act of disgrace and because of the fact that her union with Indrajit would raise questions about her character as it would be considered as a case of incest and a taboo, her acts prove otherwise. Her refusal to marry Indrajit may not be only because of the moral codes that bind her but because she did not want Indrajit, the person she loved deeply, to be the subject of scrutiny and wrath among their family members. She cared more for his reputation and her own independence. She was a strong woman who loved Indrajit unconditionally and her love did not mean possession. Though she confesses to have succumbed to social norms, it remains a doubt whether it was the fear of social taboo that led her to not marry Indrajit or was it because of her independent nature that she did not marry Indrajit. She perhaps gave the excuse of non-acceptance of their relationship in society to avoid getting married to him. Maybe she was aware of the fact that marriage with Indrajit would bind her to fulfilling certain social duties as a responsible wife. It can also be because she knew she will have to bear with Indrajit's conflicts and his rebellious nature throughout her life. These questions remain unanswered in the play. But her autonomous nature is exhibited throughout the play where Indrajit had to accept her choice of not getting married to him but keep meeting her after his marriage. Though she appeared to be submissive she was clearly not so. She never was a victim figure. According to Anjum Katyal, Manasi "has a certain inner strength that keeps her from being a victim figure: she is not afraid to speak her mind; she advises him when she feels he is wrong; she chooses a life alone rather than go against societal norms; and she remains a friend and confidante till the end" (Katyal 197). The play portrays her to be a sophisticated and mild person who did not put forth her arguments in an aggressive manner but had a very gentle approach towards things. She symbolizes belief in society and its rules. She wanted to follow what she believed in and did not want to be influenced by others' decisions. She knew that her life should be governed by her own decisions and her opinions cannot be shaped by those of Indrajit's. From the beginning to the end, Manasi maintains her distinct identity who thoroughly asserted her independence in being who she wanted to be though she was never vocal about it. She herself confesses to being scared of rules and wanted to follow them but in the whole process she actually upheld her right to making independent choices. Her passive representation of herself was a clever attempt to stay away from arguments, chaos and ultimately separation from Indrajit. She remained calm throughout the play and achieved her purpose. Her show of compliance to rules and her disguise as the submissive woman ultimately led her to maintain her independence by not forming an alliance with Indrajit and also not getting separated from somebody she loved. So either way she got what she wanted. She did not have to marry Indrajit to maintain her friendly equation with him. Lastly, even if she did submit to social norms, it was a submission out of her own choice which ultimately portrays her to be an independent woman.

CONCLUSION

Manasi was the epitome of the intelligent and independent lady in the play, *Evam Indrajit*. She was the one who kept the other important characters like the Writer and Indrajit going. Manasi brought the best out of them by giving them the scope to express themselves well yet she herself had always maintained a calm approach towards everything. The protagonist of the play, Indrajit could not have been a fully developed character without the presence of Manasi in the play. The character of Indrajit is defined by the presence of Manasi. She is treated in a different way than other female characters in the play. Badal Sircar was clear about the fact that he was going to create a strong female presence in his play whose strength lied in her intelligence and acceptance of life, something from which the other powerful male characters gained their strength.

Though she confessed to be scared of the rules society expects her to follow as a woman, the play proves otherwise. She exercised her right to making independent choices in life and did not budge from her firm position of following the same. She refused to be a victim figure being a woman of substance and till the end only followed what she believed in thus highlighting her independent streak.

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