

Shifting Paradigms in Culture:

"A Study of Three Plays by Jean Genet: *The Maids*, *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*"

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The purpose of this dissertation is two fold. Firstly, it looks at the ways in which Genet's plays question the accepted social positions and point towards the need for a radical social change. Secondly, this dissertation also looks at Genet's understanding of theatre to underline the social contradictions through this medium. The thesis studies through a carefully worked out methodology the dynamic relationship between theatre and its viewers. This dissertation analyses the works of Genet to locate what have been identified in the argument as points of subversion. In this world of growing multiculturalism where terms like globalization have become a part of our daily life Genet's works are a case in point. Genet's plays are placed in a matrix that is positioned outside the margins of society from where they question the normative standards that govern social function. They create an alternative construct to interpret critically the normalizing tendency of society that actually glosses over the social contradictions. The thesis studies the features of both the constructs—that of society and the space outside it, and the relation that Genet's plays evolves between them. The propensity of a society that is divided both on the basis of class and gender is towards privileging groups that are powerful. Therefore the entire social rubric is structured in a way that takes into consideration the needs of such groups only. The social requirements of the less powerful ones are sidelined who are then made to believe that their betterment lies in the ideology of the dominant group. In this way these sections are effectively marginalized. In the tussle between the powerful and the less powerful groups there is one more group, that lacks power and is completely ignored. The defining aspect of this group is that it is an indicator of immorality in society. The women in the brothel, the prisoners, and the maids are some of the people that constitute this group. They have little interaction with the dominant social structure and are mostly placed outside the well-defined social boundary.

Genet's plays belong to the nineteen fifties—a period when the absurd tradition in theatre was at its peak. Genet is usually looked at from within this tradition. There is a tendency to study his plays in terms of static parameters that comment on human existence but at the end of it all vote for a status-quo position. Some of the ways of studying Genet's plays are those of ritual, reflection, and the cyclic nature of human existence and so on. Some critics quote him generously to ratify his supposed

dissociation of theatre from politics. This dissertation establishes that Genet's plays offer a scathing critique of the construction of a capitalist social system. It studies the ways in which institutions such as the brothel and the prison are a creation of the society that castigates them. Genet's plays explain the workings of the state apparatus to reveal how it creates and controls the ostracized structures. The thesis also comments on how Genet's plays point towards a state of general social blindness of the bourgeoisie who ignore the existence of such entities and take their own social position as a given.

This dissertation uses the methodology of role-playing, perform activity, and metonymy to establish that Genet's plays bring out the dialectics of theatre as well as the dialectical connection between theatre and society. The thesis in its analysis of Genet's plays shows how in them theatre is located at the social interface making a dialectical connection with the society it reflects and the area beyond its confines. Conflicting reality being a characteristic of Genet's plays the position of the audience is always in a state of flux. S/he has the capacity to intervene in a significant manner in the events on stage. This makes the audience an actor even as s/he continues to watch the performances. The thesis has been divided into six chapters. The "Introduction" explains the theoretical concepts used in the body of this thesis. In this the ideological problematic is clearly outlined. The various concepts that have been used in the thesis are explained from the point of view of the ideological base constituted by Feminism, Marxism, and Post-structuralism. The "Introduction" explains terms such as role-playing, performativity, metonymy, and dialectics. It dwells in detail on the nuances of the title of this thesis and therefore in the context of the tools employed explains culture and paradigm.

The first chapter, "Role-Playing and *The Maids*" focuses on the dialectical nature of theatre where the audience has the potential of becoming an actor just as the actor has the capacity to observe the performance with a distant eye. Terms such as role, performance, actor, and audience are placed within the framework of dialectics in theatre. It also highlights the need to take into account the changing currents in history that determine the formation of role at each stage. This takes cognizance of the different economic groups in society. Judith Butler's idea of performativity, and Marco de Marinis' study of the position of the spectator provide the theoretical backdrop to this chapter. "Role-Playing and *The Maids*" then analyses critically the position of the maids in a bourgeois household.

The second chapter of this dissertation, "Panopticon and *The Balcony*" in its reading of *The Balcony* points towards the constructions of the brothel, its social bearings as well as its cultural determinants that are not held to be of any importance. It propounds Foucault's understanding of the prison based on Bentham's panopticon as the theoretical premise and draws a connection between the brothel in Genet's *The Balcony* and the structure and function of the panopticon. The prison and the brothel harbor the immoral debris of society that is to be forgotten the moment it is ejected out of the social space. This chapter defines the term "prostitute" and confirms how Genet's *The Balcony* reveals the hidden social sub-text--One that clearly underlines the brothel as a product of a society that creates it but does not take any social responsibility for its construction. These ideas are then placed in the context of Genet's *The Balcony* to reveal how the dominant state ideology is implemented through power heads such as the Bishop, the Judge and the General. It studies the way in which the state glosses over the needs of groups that have been ostracised to ensure the

smooth functioning of society.

The third chapter, "Decolonization and *The Blacks*" studies the subject position of the colonized community of the blacks emphasizing the need for decolonization. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* forms the theoretical base of this chapter and his ideas are applied for an understanding of decolonization. This is aided by Ngugi's *Decolonizing the Mind* that helps decode the process of colonization in all its aspects—linguistic, social, cultural, political. This chapter explores the possibilities of decolonization in Genet's *The Blacks* aiming at a process that understands in totality the social and political positioning of the colonized subject. Instead of a merely ritualistic reading of *The Blacks* this chapter uses decolonization to restore the dignity of the colonized community.

The fourth chapter, "Possibilities: An Analysis of the Last Scenes of the Plays" analyses the endings of each of the three plays. This chapter comments on the politics of Jean Genet as playwright. It is usually believed that his plays do little at the ideological level to change the social scenario. This chapter cites various critics on Genet who have so far restricted the interpretation of his plays to the level of either ritual or metaphor. It questions the stasis associated with Genet's plays and moves towards an interpretation that is dynamic. This establishes how the endings of each of the plays use spectacle and ritual not for their own sake but to strike at the roots of a social system that is divided and considers a part of its populace as socially dysfunctional.

The final chapter titled "Conclusion" puts together the ideas that have been worked out in the previous chapters making a statement about Genet's plays and his concerns with theatre. It sums up the argument emphasizing the performative aspects of Genet's plays and the way they challenge the perpetuation of power in society. The "Conclusion" explains how Genet's plays point towards a world free of all kinds of hierarchies with a more humane outlook towards survival. This dissertation on three plays of Genet establishes through methodological tools that Genet's plays question and subvert the ingrained pattern of social positions. They simultaneously create new speaking spaces for groups that have not had a voice so far and thereby shift the position of the audience towards change that would be radical and evolutionary. This thesis confirms that Genet emphasizes the social function of theatre and looks at it as a medium that has the potential of bringing about change.

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