



**THEME OF PROSTITUTION IN PRATAP SHARMA'S
"A TOUCH OF BRIGHTNESS"**

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ABSTRACT

Pratap Sharma, the winner of Sahitya Akademi Award is a versatile dramatist in Indian writing in English. His plays reflect the contemporary reality in the society. He has handled the controversial issues like prostitution, premarital sex, poverty, identity, myth etc. He is one of the most outstanding dramatists who have the rare talent to investigate the problems in the society and to dramatize them on the stage. The present paper discusses his major play "A Touch of Brightness" which was banned for seven years. The paper focuses on the central character Rukmini, a prostitute who is a victim of age old Indian custom Devdasi and her vulnerable situation on the account of the selfish purpose of flesh trading community. "A Touch of Brightness" (1964) centres around Rukmini, a girl sold to a brothel in Mumbai and her relationship with Pidku, a street urchin, who makes some fruitless efforts to free her from the clutches of Bhabhi Rani as a prostitute. But she plainly denies eloping with him. Finally in the course of time Rukmini dies due to disease like Syphilis and Gonorrhoea. Rukmini mesmerizes Pidku with her visionary stories of the gods and her dreams of a married life as the wife of the blue god Krishna. Even in a brothel, her extravagant optimism never ceases but only deepens. She ties a coloured thread round his right wrist, in the traditional way of raksha-bandhan, thus adopting him as a brother for life.

Key words: prostitution, brothel, social reality, sufferings, exploitation, optimism,

INTRODUCTION

Pratap Sharma was an Indian playwright, novelist, author of books for children, commentator, actor and documentary film-maker from United Kingdom. His dialogues are effective and themes are relevant to contemporary Indian English drama as sex, poverty, identity, and myth and full of historical aspects. Though, he emerged as a dramatic voice on



the Indian literary scene along with various contemporary tools, he became an intellectual island at where the reader can subdue his inquiry. His association with the Indian National Theatre began in 1961 with his first full length play *"Bars Invisible"* and continued until the production of the banned *"A Touch of Brightness"*. Sharma has voiced many national and international award-winning documentaries and short films. He is the voice on most of the Son et lumiere shows produced in India. He was the TV host of the popular programme *"What's the Good Word?"* produced by Television Centre, Mumbai.

The play was banned in Mumbai in 1966 on the grounds that it was set in the infamous red light area of the city and therefore 'dealt with subjects which should not be depicted on stage'. Seven years later, in 1972, the Mumbai High Court announced that the censoring authority had 'exceeded its jurisdiction' and the ban was revoked. The Times, London asserts about the play,

"This is an extraordinarily beautiful and moving piece of work and its quality springs from a contrast of light and that same dark side of human activity which caused it to be banned."

The play was produced by the Indian National Theatre in Mumbai in 1973. After forty years, it is selected by Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters). This play is little bit mingled with spiritual ethos and philosophical talk. Sharma evidently intensifies to show the backdrop of the 'Spirituality' of India. It is symbolic, poetic and a significant contribution to the contemporary social issues while having a realistic presentation of the sensitive world.

Pratap Sharma's writing was appealing and convincing to the readers and critics. After his death, Alka Sahani, a leading journalist and columnist of The Indian Express praises with paying homage to the playwright as,

"Pratap Sharma a rare talent in Indian theatre, radio and cinema passes away in Mumbai. He was more than a mere voice. Anybody who thinks of Pratap Sharma as a playwright, a writer, a voice over artist or actor, misses the point a little as he is all of this but when all the four are put together, they made a character and a talent that's rare."

Pratap Sharma's *A Touch of Brightness* (1965) is a bold attempt to depict a social reality that rarely receives attention from literary artists. It was written at a time when its theme was considered as taboo. The play was an experiment itself, both in its bold theme and technique. Pratap Sharma has written this play to caution a young high society woman of his acquaintance about the dangers of letting herself slide into the lowest part of the spectrum of existence. Sharma says,



“A dramatic work based on recognizable social reality is often harder to take than the social reality by itself; it does more than present a casual point of view, it communicates an experience of concentrated intensity.”

It termed as inappropriate for staging performance and banned till the writer won the case in the court of law and the ban was lifted. It has been raised by the British actor and playwright Emlyn Williams as having breadth of vision of Zola and the depth of feeling of Gorky. The Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka remarked that he developed interest in Indian philosophy after having read *A Touch of Brightness*. Pratap Sharma’s social vision and understanding are compared with those of Ibsen, Anton Chekov and Strindberg.

“*A Touch of Brightness*” deals with the theme of prostitution. It reflects the dark side of life in Bombay’s red-light area where prostitution as profession thrives. It reflects Pratap Sharma’s sense of social commitment. It depicts a grim story and situation in the lives of the prostitutes in Mumbai. It offers a sad story which rarely gets narration, is often suppressed rather than evoked. It is related with mythical solution and philosophical thoughts. It has been concretized into small eight typical scenes and not parted in traditional or formal acts. It is the delineation of some backdrops of life, man and so called society.

Pratap Sharma points out that such situation always appeal the creative artists. He has borrowed the title from a poem by Wen Yi-Tuo called *Dead Water*. The poet says-

**“So this ditch of dead and hopeless water
May boast a touch of brightness
If the toads cannot endure the deadly silence
The water may burst out singing”.**

“*A Touch of Brightness*” in the play is the love and affection that pervades the grim climate in it. The interest of the play centres on a South Indian girl Prema, the daughter of a Devdasi. She is compelled to run away from her home in Mysore to Bombay and sold at a brothel by a pavement dweller, Benarasi Babu. A shrewd middle aged brothel keeper Bhabhi Rani persuaded Prema for a long stay as a prostitute and also introduces her as a new physical entertainer only for her own gains. It describes relationship between Pidku and Rukmini. It focuses on Pidku’s affection for Rukmini and Bhartendra’s love for her when she turns a prostitute. The play can also be discerned in the spiritual yearning of the girl in her innocent and imaginary world of happiness. Pratap Sharma directly focused on the theme of prostitution and life on the streets in Mumbai. It is the story of the prostitutes in Mumbai, the circumstances which lead them to that profession and that their ultimate fate. The play also depicts the life on the footpath and the nexus between the two. It underlines the fact that these



people are sensitive human beings and can rise above the average humanity through internal sufferings and understanding of each other. These people are always thwarted and exploited by the so-called civilized society.

The opening of the play foretells the theme. Bombay's red light district appears on the pavement through various voices.

Voice I- This is a road with nowhere to go a road that none claims, this is where we have come to be by walking about in our chains. This is a road for a wandering whore a road that has no name, but come to see and you will agree we dwell in houses of fame.

Voice II- Ah, but look-

Voice III- I show you Sahib.

Voice IV- On every side there is filth....

Voice II- Sindhi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Mysore, Marathi...

The play rotates around human relationship and spiritual yearning of the men and women who have been dubbed as outcaste. The cage reveals the life of unfortunate women engaged in the profession of prostitution. These women invite our sympathy rather than apathy or aversion. It is the story of the flesh trading community set in the red light area in Mumbai. A beggar girl called Prema, renamed as Rukmini, is forced to join the trade run by an elderly prostitute called Bhabhi Rani. Other girls Basanti, Vatsala and Suraksha are a part of this cage but Rukhmani is different because she is the daughter of a Devdasi, acquainted with the Hindu scriptures and believes in god, a creator, preserver and the destroyer of the universe. It was the time when prostitutes and other sex workers often suffered from such deadly diseases like - equivalent of today's HIV and Aids, though these diseases today are passed on to the general public. In due course of time, Rukmini suffers from these diseases and in a state of pregnancy, dies.

The play depicts a parallel story of footpath dwellers called Benarasi Babu and Pidku, an urchin of about ten years, who by the time the play ends, turns adolescent. Benarasi Babu has occupied a space on the footpath and considers himself as its sole owner. He does not allow trespassers. He disapproves of Pidku's relationship with Prema, the beggar girl, who has tied him rakhi. For Benarasi Babu, the rakhi is no better than a piece of string tied by a woman to grab money from the man whom she calls brother. His annoyance with tradition and with the civilized ways of the world is explicit at every stage. He is immensely interested in the game of chess and wants Pidku to learn it because, he believes, with the knowledge of the game,



one can develop skill to deal with the hostile social forces. However, Pidku is not interested in the game and sends his time in begging and stealing.

These two stories are linked together by Pidku's affection for Prema, now Rukmini, who has become a prostitute. He loves the girls so much that he wants to pay for hundred and fifty rupees to Bhabhi Rani, and get back to the girl who is sold out for that amount. In the mean time, he is arrested and sent to juvenile prison. On his release and return to cage, he finds Rukhmani dead.

Besides these main characters, other characters like Dariwalla, the doctor, Shri. Bhartendra's, an ex- sadhu and quack and other men and women develop the characters. The story of the play resembles a movie by Meera Nair called *Salaam Bombay*. This play has been published 20 years prior to the release of this movie and leaves it to readers to decide who copied whom.

Thus Pratap Sharma (1939-2011) brings out different facets and literary merits of his plays and this paper tries to measure his dramatic talent in brief. He has depicted the bad plight of Prostitutes who stay in Bombay's red light area, a cage of prostitution. They become victimized by the flesh trading community and thoroughly become the object of ridicule and sex. The civilized society exploits them without considering their problems. The author has presented the harsh reality of these prostitutes.

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