



RELIGION, RITUAL, AND POLITICS: A STUDY OF SURENDRA VERMA'S FROM THE SUNSET TO SUNRISE (SURAJ KI ANTIM KIRAN SE SURAJ KI PEHLI KIRAN TAK) (1962)

DR. AYESHA ANWAR WARSI

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English
Karamat Husain Muslim Girls' P.G. College
Lucknow (UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

In a world where religious beliefs reign supreme there is one group of people that dominates the masses through their religious dictatorship and then there exists another that submissively admits to the dictates of the former by being extremely God fearing. This paper tries to discover the theme of such domination in history through one of the important play Suraj ki Antim Kiran se Suraj ki Pehli Kiran Tak (1962) written by a renowned Hindi writer, Surendra Verma. He has written several novels, plays and screenplays that exist not only in Hindi, but also in Urdu and English. This paper deals with the supremacy of religious "Purohits" and Priests over the king and his kingdom. It is about, how religion remains a subject which is beyond the understanding of human beings and can only be gripped under an expert supervision of the religious clergy, in oblivion that how the clergy can facilitate religion according to the need of changing times. This play is about adultery in royal household permitted by the priest and kinsman for the future heir of the state. They arrange things for the ceremony and no one puts any objection to such affairs; even the king himself becomes helpless to deal with it. To these people things are quite easy going to their understanding of religion and can be governed by introducing new rules to the righteous way of justifying them. Ironically such kind of discriminatory innovation is meant only for the upper class not for the lower class at all.

Key Words: Religion, Ritual, Politics, Sexuality, Supremacy.

INTRODUCTION

Your Majesty! It will be easier for you to face the situation if you just concentrate on your goal. Arjun had said to Dronacharya that he could see only the right eye of the fish.

DR. AYESHA ANWAR WARSI

1Page



India is a country full of variations where colors, religions, rituals, and cultures vary at every mile. The blindfolded attitude of people towards religion is typical in that they have an unquestionable stance about issues which concern their religious beliefs and practices and predominantly on how they perceive it and react to it. Hence they are rigid and particular in exercising it. Keeping an unobjectionable and irrational approach they affirm certain superstitions that are illogical and that which need consideration. The researched play deals with similar such beliefs which at once may startle the readers but the machinery of the play plays a vital role in justifying the events of the play. The reader is convinced with the action throughout and how it is historically relevant concerning female sexuality and existing relationships between a man and a woman. There are however certain events of the play which relate to the issues of gender equality. Keeping these points in mind *Suraj ki Antim Kiran se Suraj ki Pehli Kiran Tak* (1962), is a play that concerns certain factors that are governed by the ruling government or monarchy in the light of Buddhist and Pre Buddhist societies that existed and still exist in India. They include and encompass innumerable social issues like customs, traditions, values and behaviours towards certain norms of society relating to marriage, gender, sex etc.

The play is written by a renowned Hindi playwright Surendra Verma. A leading and prominent Hindi playwright, Surendra Verma occupies an important place in the list of the modern Indian Dramatists. He has several works translated into different Indian languages to his credit. Amongst those are short stories, satires, novels and plays. He was conferred with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1993, Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996 and Vyas Samman in 2016. The researched play, *Suraj ki Antim Kiran se Suraj ki Pehli Kiran Tak* (*From Sunset to Sunrise*) has been translated into six languages including English and earns the similar popularity in all these languages. It was translated in English with the title *From the Sunset to Sunrise* by Jaya Krishnamachari, almost a decade later from the original Hindi version and was published in 1972. This is a small play divided into three acts. It highlights the reality of society and the diplomatic nature of elite class and role of status in society which helps a lot in so many ways. There are five major characters in the play: a king of the Malla kingdom Okkak, his Queen Sheelvati, and king's trinity such as Royal Priest, Commander in Chief, and the Prime Minister (they dominate over the king). Although, Okkak is a good king but lacks vitality; he is impotent who is unable to give a heir to his kingdom. It is the law of the kingdom that if there is no heir of the king, the kingdom will be over powered by a nearby king; therefore, he needs a successor who can ascend his throne and take over his father's kingdom. Hence, his loyal trinity (a group of three men) contrives a solution by which the problem will be resolved. According to the Priest there is a provision in the religion which can serve as a remedy to the existing problem, and then there are arranged three trials for the Queen. The Priest suggests them that in a full moon night Queen should convert herself into a "Darmanati" and should select a groom for a night. She will have to

DR. AYESHA ANWAR WARSI

2Page



spend the desired time with him “from the Sunset to Sunrise” and if this night produces a child that child will become the legal heir and will be accepted by the kingdom as well as the king. The paper thus endeavors to divulge the corruption in religion and use of politics in royal household and how an outsider dominates and changes the life and even the image of the king. The Priest engenders an idea for future heir and only the king opposes this notion while trinity of the king favors it. They arrange ceremony without any permission of the king. Therefore, the king gets annoyed, and expresses it while he speaks to his servant:

Okkak (irritatedly) How I am get sleep? The forgetfulness....as long as this chamber exists, as long as his body exists....till there is life.... (386)

The play commences with an expression of disgust of the king of Malla kingdom, Okkak. There is a preparation of a ritual for the Queen in which she will become a Dharmavati to select a “paramour” for a night. The king’s loyal people thus arrange a ceremony for the sake of the future heir. Okkak is apprehensive because it is the matter of his ego. Here Prime Minister tries to convince the King and says:

He is helpless and can’t object but his self-esteem gets hurt. He puts himself under the spell of alcohol in order to forget that he is incapable to produce a heir and that he is just an “adjective” and nothing more than that. He therefore gets furious on the Queen and condemns her for the preparation.

SHEELVATI Aryputra!

OKKAK (turns; looks at Sheelvati and smiles pathetically.) Not for me this address now...this address belongs to somebody else tonight....can you hear the sound of these instruments? ...this sound waves carry within them the hopes of so many anxious hearts...I hear that candidates have come from very long distances to try their luck...I am told that the very fast runners...capable of covering fifty miles in a day...were employed to spread the message...Not a single citizen was left, throughout the length and breadth of the Malla kingdom, to whose ears this proclamation had not reached. (looks at Sheelvati) you have also heard, haven’t you? (394)

This conversation reveals the psychological trauma of the king; fragmentation, incomplete self, struggle for the accomplishment of desire etc are integral to the king’s psyche. There is a conflict in the mind of the king and he is expressing it in front of his people. At this moment he shows bitterness which is accompanied with heavy sarcasm. This act of “Darmanati” is a subject of shame for him, and by this act the whole kingdom becomes aware of the physical weakness of the king. So he is sarcastic towards the treatment of the world and lamenting on

DR. AYESHA ANWAR WARSI

3P a g e



his condition that “he is a king but can’t stop such shameful ritual.” The trinity of the king tries to console him in the following words:

PRIME MINISTER You are well aware of the traditions of the Malla Kingdom...that as soon as five years of a king’s reign are completed, an announcement regarding a successor is made. But despite so much time having elapsed since your marriage and ascent to the throne, you have had no issues.

ROYAL PRISTE And due to your continued illness for a month now, an apprehension has been created in the minds of your subjects that...!

OKKAK But that was just an ordinary fever and now I am completely well, and hale and hearty...looking at me can anyone say that I have but a few days to live? (387)

She replies:

OKKAK (vehemently) No...there is world of difference between the two.

SHEELVATI (emphatically) No, there is none...you will keep awake, here, the whole night... the same sense of degradation, shame and loathing...the same anxiety, suffocation and nervousness...assailing both of us.

OKKAK (with the faint smile)Why? Why...the nervousness?

SHEELVATI How do you talk!...don’t you know the epithets that your poets use to describe a woman like me who is confined to the interior chambers of the palace? They call me ‘The one untouched by the rays of the sun!...And tonight, the same woman walk into the Palace courtyard with the Jaimala in her hands,...the center of attraction of thousands of pairs of eyes...and will walk away with some man for this night...a man she has never seen before...and to such man she will surrender her body...her beauty, her youth and her virginity...! (396)

The Royal trinity shows him a bright picture of his future heir who will become the successor of the king. These people are so dominating that Okkak as a king is unable to object and fails to force them to stop such ceremony. They try to make him understand and later when they are not successful they leave him because it is the time of sunset and they need to start the ritual and so the Queen should be ready for that. They also feel that it is a time taking process and he will learn it gradually.

DR. AYESHA ANWAR WARSI

4P a g e



Besides the king, Okkak, the Queen, Sheelvati is also thoughtful about the reaction of her king. She is concerned and restless about: How will she face the ritual? How will she select a “Paramour” for a night? The ritual would grant only “three trials” which is worrisome as she is unanswerable to many including the public. She expresses her fear to the Prime Minister in the following words:

SHEELVATI I am afraid....

PRIME MINISTER I can understand your uneasiness...but please think of it as...it is just a matter of going through a process...a formality, a filling in of empty space...for those few moments please forget yourself completely...close your eyes and ears...let your body absolutely loose...deaden your senses and your feelings...let your thoughts dwell only on the outcome of this...though your mind's eye just visualise the innocent expression of a child's face, its curly hair, milk teeth...the fulfillment of womanhood...contentment that comes with motherhood...! (398)

Queen Sheelvati is a young lady with untouched emotions she is anxious for the upcoming success of delivering a heir for the Kingdom. She is spending restless nights just like the king and his highly uncomfortable with circumstances. Servants arrange flower bath full of fragrance for her and beautiful clothes for this occasion. Now, Prime Minister comes to the Queen and makes her understand the importance and need of the hour and how she should cope with it. According to him this is in concern with the welfare of the kingdom and she should be rather targeted towards it and that this is her “Dharma” as a Queen to safeguard the future of Malla kingdom by producing a heir. Sheelvati is extremely distressed that she has to undergo an ordeal since the king is pretentious of his disagreement with it by being rude and sarcastic to her in his talks. The Queen is jeopardized in getting away with this difficult situation.

As we proceed we see that bell has rung as a reminder of Sunset. It is the time to start the ritual of selecting the paramour for the night. She dresses up beautifully and carries a garland. This ceremony is open for all men of the kingdom and they all are sitting in rows while Queen passes on and selects a groom. It is like a “swamvar” in which female selects a man and put on garland on him. Queen Sheelvati moves on from the first row towards second by her chariot and selects her ex-lover Pratosh. He becomes her paramour for a night and in that span of time she becomes aware of the real meaning of married life and the relationship. Her untouched emotions are provoked during the night and realize the real meaning of intimate relationship. This is entailed in her conversation with the king:



SHEELVATI (As if still immersed in that experience) Intimacy of the embrace... the passionate heat of the kisses...you are unable to bear hearing about it?...one the one hand while I gained a lot last night, on the other I also realised how much I have stood to lose all this while....the thrill of gaining something from losing something....(415)

SHEELVATI (Looks at him steadily. Coldly, in a contemptuous tone) Even if you want, you will never get to know it....but along with you, to deprive me also of this knowledge?...who?...what for? (416)

Now she is at the stage where there is no choice besides to live with the king. Within a night Sheelvati is not like the one she was earlier; being docile and obedient she has developed such audacity which changes her whole personality. In an audacious tone she questions:

SHEELVATI (In a sugary voice) So, tell me Prime Minister how was the night for you?

PRIME MINISTER (Started) Your Majesty!

SHEELVATI Oh! Come on, don't be shy....

OKKAK (In a sharp voice) Sheelvati! You are not in your senses.

SHEELVATI (looks at the Royal Priest with a wicked smile) the Royal Priest is a widower, so it is pointless to ask him anything. (In a voice pregnant with meaning) but only recently a naughty bird had whispered in my ears that...with a maid of his...he has some pious liaison.

ROYAL PRIEST (annoyed) Your Highness! You are maligning me. This is against righteous conduct. (417)

She reveals the reality and hypocrisy of the royal trinity with great courage. Here, the Priest reminds us of the Pandit of Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (2003) in which Panditji's rules are lenient for Sohini and rigid for her brother Bakha. Coming back, when Okkak wants to stop her, her mind diverts towards him and she starts blaming him for his selfishness. According to her, he used her as a cure for himself. Despite being well aware of his physical weakness i.e. impotency, he married her and used her. Furthermore, when Prime Minister wants to know about the good news which he can pass on to the public, she does not say anything besides to arrange the second trial after a week. Because, her first trial is not



fruitful enough to produce any result. In the end of the play all the male characters are speechless and couldn't question her.

It is clear that the play *From the Sunset to Sunrise* is a perfect example of corruption in religion and politics which gives way to several illegal remedies to problems concerning sex and birth. Surendra Verma draws our attention towards the reality of the world, where things change according to the class. This also reminds us of Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in which Tess is seduced by Alec but nobody blames him. Tess herself is deemed responsible for this act as there were strict moral codes of conduct for women in Victorian England. Tess is thus prohibited to enter in to the church because she is not a pure lady while later when she marries Alec the society accepts her completely. As in the play for the sake of the kingdom and the king, the royal Priest finds out a ritual which is legal and nobody dares to put an objection because it is a matter of religion and religion is the sole department of Priests and Purohits. They are self-styled creators and the destroyers of the norms and society never has a say regarding it. Even the king lacks authority to voice against it. As in a Hindi movie *Sin* (2005), Father William establishes a physical relationship with Rose-Mare and the irony lies in that it is neither sin for him or for Rose.

The play *From the Sunset to Sunrise* thus exposes that religion, ritual, and politics are more powerful than any other thing in the world as these are the things monitored by special machinery especially designed to operate it. It is clear that there is someone who is more powerful than the king and that in the play is the Priest. There is no way to escape because it is the belief that religious people are the messengers of "God" and most of the times they pose to be God themselves.

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