

***The Lahnee's Pleasure* by Ronnie Govender - A Representation of Socio-Political life of South African Indian Society of early 1970s.**

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is about the South African Indian writer Ronnie Govender's play "The Lahnee's Pleasure", written under the backdrop of apartheid effect. As the play has been written in early 1970s, it catches many side effect of this big political movement. The play revolves around three main characters Sunny, Mothie and the Stranger who have been depicted with their attitude and mentality towards Whites. As the play moves some of the character also changes in their belief. Lahnee here is the representation of entire white community and the characters like Sunny and Mothie feels that it is needed to please Lahnee for smooth going life. The play is also remarkable in use of language which quite live with all the colours of Indian, English and local patios.

Keywords: South African Indian Theatre – Ronnie Govender – *The Lahnee's Pleasure* – Socio-political life – Apartheid – South African Indian Society – Black Conscious Movement – Race- Group Areas Act – New Language - Colonial mindset – Enslaved Mentality

"The Lahnee's Pleasure" is the most celebrated play by prominent South African Indian writer Ronnie Govender. Ronnie Govender was born in 1934, in Cato Manor Durban, he is a South African playwright of Tamil descent. Ronnie Govender is internationally renowned playwright, who has also contributed as director, producer, short-story writer and novelist. His book, *At the Edge* and other Cato Manor Stories, won the 1997 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa region. Ronnie Govender is one of the pioneers of the Shah Theatre Academy and many other writers are trained under him.

The play "The Lahnee's Pleasure" is written in early 1970s. The time period of 1948-1994 was known as the Apartheid in South Africa. "Apartheid was the ideology supported by the National Party (NP) government and was introduced in South Africa in 1948. Apartheid called for the separate development of the different racial groups in South Africa. On paper it appeared to call for equal development and freedom of cultural expression, but the way it was implemented made this impossible. Apartheid made laws forced the different racial groups to live separately and develop separately, and grossly unequally too. It tried to stop all inter-marriage and social integration between racial groups. During apartheid, to have a friendship with someone of a different race generally brought suspicion upon you, or worse. More than this, apartheid was a social system which severely disadvantaged the majority of the population, simply because they did not share the skin colour

of the rulers. Many were kept just above destitution because they were 'non-white'". (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa>). So, the backdrop of apartheid regime is very much crucial in the background of the play. The various under currents and aftereffects of apartheid have been felt throughout the play.

"The Lahnee's Pleasure" published in 1972 is historically important play as it has been known as "the first theatrical exposure of working-class Indian South African life on stage" (366 Forward Bose). 1960s and 1970s Indian South African Theatre has witnessed Black Consciousness (BC) movement – the movement is initiated by Steve Biko, South African Students Organisation (SASO), and the Black People's Convention (BPC). "Steve Biko's Black consciousness movement challenged existing racial identities by seeking to construct a new political identity, 'Black', which includes Indians, Africans and Coloureds." (250 Lal). It is notable that this movement has not much affected Indian South African Theatre but the movement has at least started challenging moderate politics and raised many questions among the many sensible folks of the community. Moreover during this time period Indian South African Theatre has started to find their own aesthetic voice. "A new genre of indigenous South African Indian theatre that combined social criticism, political satire, and the use of local idioms and expressions arose" (366 Forward Bose). The play "The Lahnee's Pleasure" has enjoyed the the longest journey of performances to make this new genre accessible

to the common population, at the same time it is also noteworthy that Ronnie Govender has refused to perform the play to state-run Performing Arts Council for mixed audiences who are supposed to sit separately. The incident itself reflects the temper of the author who is against the prejudiced behaviour of Whites towards Indians. "The Lahnee's Pleasure" is a wonderful document of the contemporary socio-cultural life of Indian community. The various perspectives towards the white conduct have been dramatically represented in the play. The prejudiced and segregated Indian community is focused in lighter tone. Each character of the play has own story of suffering.

To begin with the setting of the play "The Lahnee's Pleasure" has very suggestive set of pub situated at "small Natal North Coast town" (378). The pub is divided into two sections, one for "nonwhite" (378) and other exclusively for Whites. The very beginning of the play says "The nonwhite" pub is separated from the white pub by a partition." Somehow this partition is not confined on material level but it has very minute undercurrents. The wall of pub also represents the strong barrier within a society prevailing among coloureds and whites. The worse effect of apartheid regime in South Africa is the separation between the races of the society where it was unwritten law that Whites are superior to coloureds. The entire play has the locale of pub mainly. Here pub becomes one of the characters that have witnessed many ups and downs of the mood of the other characters. Moreover, the description of the further premises reveals before us the socio-economical life of contemporary South African society. "a window which looks out over the sugar mill – the life blood of the town" (378). The very minor hint of the sugar-mill discloses the huge history of Indian indentures at South Africa. Indians are mainly brought to South Africa to work in sugar plantation and sugar mills. It is notable that the first Indian indenture took place in 1860 and the play has the backdrop of 1972. The play reveals the fact that even after such a big time span the majority of Indians are dependent upon sugar mills; they still are working class people. Can we conclude that their designation as workers and their economical status have worked as important factor to be treated as secondary?

The play "The Lahnee's Pleasure" casts the major characters Sunny, Stranger and Mothie. Sunny is a barman whose father was also working in the same pub. Stranger is "about 35 years old and

neatly dressed" (378) Indian fellow. Mothie is a middle aged, poor, sugar mill laborer having seven children and no wife. The minor characters are Prem, Mothie's ten years old son, The Lahnee(boss) of the pub Mr.Simpson, Johnny and few policemen. The conversation in the pub between these three Indian characters Sunny, Mothie and Stranger reveals basically their attitude towards the Lahnee – Lahnee is a white boss. Mothie is disturbed because his daughter has run away with somebody and police is not ready to take his complaint instead of taking complaint they started laughing at him. The attitude of Mothie for the Whites is notable here. As he says, "Those bloody bastards man. They think they can act like that to me and get away." (380). Mothie and Sunny both are average South African Indian citizens. Sunny is a fellow who believes in false appreciations of the Whites to run his life smooth. He just wants to work as puppet under the White dominance. Mothie's anger is here against government, power who does not provide them equal right of justice. As a reader or audience it will be interesting journey to note down the changing colours of the stances the characters are having for "Lahnee" at various junctures of the play. Here "Lahnee" is not the boss of one particular pub but representative of entire White race.

The second character Sunny seems very conscious about his job and impression throughout the play. He wants to present good, docile image of Indian community in front of whites. He keeps on warning Mothie, "Keep quiet Mothie, man" (383), "Sssh man, don't make so much noise. The wit ous are laughing at us" (383), "Don't shout, White people are listening to us..." (383). Sunny's constant warns shows his fear for Lahnee who can remove him from a job. Sunny represents those common people of society who can butter up Whites to get the benefits. At this point surprisingly Mothie answers very aptly, "What shame? You think I'm running naked here. This is a bar this. Let them laugh. What you think they, God?" (383).

The third major character Stranger also has his own predicament in this politically affected time. He says, "We used to live in Mayville. We had a big cottage, but now it's white area." (389). "Our own house. We lived so happily there until the whites came and they just kicked us out..." (389). As it has the direct reference of 'Group Areas Act'. According to this act, urban areas were to be divided into racially segregated zones where members of one specific race alone could live and

work. As Brij Lal notes, “Between 1950 and 1980, around 140,000 Indians were forcibly relocated in Durban from their original homes to new residential areas under the Group Areas Act of 1950.” (250 Lal) Though he was a victim of political destruction, he has his own voice. Alike Mothie and Sunny he does not surrenders himself to the white mentality, on the contrary he tries to explain them their confined mentality. He very well questions when Sunny was addressed as “Coolie” (390) by cop. The Stranger nicely opines, “I would rather have paid the fine! Nobody calls me a coolie or a bliksem – not even a cop” (390). Thus three of these major character reflects different mentality as Sunny is totally enslaved to the colonialism, Mothie dwindles in between and Stranger represents the new class of society who has arisen for their rights.

There many instances in the play which depicts the contemporary social and cultural life of Indians in South Africa during early 1970s. For example when Sunny narrates about Mothie, “He’s a tractor driver. They only pay him R60 a month” (384) which depicts the economic injustice made to the labourers. One of the rituals as Mothie narrates, “Must do prayers for thirteen-day ceremony, cook the food, make the sweetmeats” (385) depicts the attached roots with Indian rituals, at one instance Mothie says, “Our girls don’t use all that (Scent and deodorant. You know why? They must bathe everyday in running water when they light the god lamp. We don’t eat beef and pork. We don’t smell like white people.” (392) or when Johnny describes, “I also worked honest once. I left school because my parents couldn’t afford to send me, like. I worked in this factory in Pinetown. Then this wit ou joined us. I had to teach him the job. He was a foreigner and he couldn’t even speak English I taught him everything and then he started pushing me around.” (405). From all these instances the various shades of social and cultural life can be derived. They are the collage of racism, economical injustice, oscillating mindset of Indian community, roots in Indian culture etc.

One of minor character Johnny is introduced Act Two. He has been suspected for the affair with Mothie’s daughter. Johnny’s past allows Sunny to suspect him and his acceptance that he is flirting a girl with “Crazy pair of legs, long black hair and crazy tits” (397) doubles his suspect. Though Sunny was wrong in his belief as Mothie’s daughter surrenders at police station with some other boy. So, the entire incident and Sunny’s trap to catch Johnny seems farcical. At the same time Johnny’s views in the existing South African Indian

society, “I’m going to pull out the country, man. There’s no future here. Out there there’s a whole lot of living. I want to go to a place where I can get the chance to live like a human being. Here you walk into a bazaar and some cheap white tit treats you like dirt.” (405). This is also one side of the society. The new young generation wants to escape the situation for the better life. They were not sure whether it will solve the problem or so. They even were not interested in solving problem but just wanted to live life and be merry.

At the end of the play the mentality and attitude of Mothie has been totally changed. The anguish seen in the begging has been disappeared as Lahnee Mr.Simpson has helped him and recommended police to get his complaint. His daughter has been caught and boy’s parents gets ready for their children’s wedding. Everything ends happily and Mothie bestows all the credit to Lahnee. Forgetting everything he praises Lahnee.

Sunny and Mothie are now totally under the surrender of Lahnees-Whites. They are not affected with the tags like “Coolie” (390), “Bloody idiot” (402), “Sammy” (408) etc. Their minds have been eclipsed under colonialism. They have accepted slavery of thoughts. They can’t see or feel the insult, oppression done to them. Stranger again tries to explain them,

“Stranger: Just who the hell do they think they are? What makes them so damn superior? You know something, when these guys were walking around in caves wearing animal skins, our people were building temples in India. When they were hanging on to raw meat, our people were cooking their food...and...and....and you know something else? – Counting, numerals – where do you think they learned it from? They learned it from us! They learned it from the Indians Now they walk all over us and you guys just sit there – yes sir, no sir. God, you make me sick!” (402)

Though all the efforts by Stranger goes in vain as they are happy with what they have.

The end of the play is very suggestive as Lahnee addresses Stranger as “Sammy” (408), Stranger turn red in fury and angrily replies, “You got no right to call me Sammy! Sammy!” (408). And suddenly Mothie holds stranger and tries to call it a “joking” (408). Finally Stranger leaves the place. Mothie is fascinated by the great deed the Lahnee has done for him and he becomes totally slave to Lahnee saying,

Mothie: Don’t worry about him, boss. You want I must sing for you, boss...

Lahnee: Yes, come on Mothie...

Mothie: I can dance for you too, boss.(408)

The play “The Lahnee’s Pleasure” is also remarkable for the language used in it. Ronnie Govender successfully introduces the Indian patois which they use to all South Africans. As Govender himself admits, “Even if we (politically conscious South African writers) wrote in English we had to find our own tongue.” (370). The play has the finest use of modern English used for South African Indian theatre. Only this language can bring out the ethos of particular race. There are many instances like many proper nouns are uttered in Indian way, “Sunniya” (381), “Premwa”(380), moreover the sentences are repeated for example, “ Hey, you know Lahnee will make a noise, eh, you know Lahnee will make a noise!” (379). Sometimes this repetition shows the dilemma of the character. The typical expressions like “arreh, jannethe bhai” (385), “For nothing, reh Sunniya” (380), “Arreh, I know your whole family.” (381), “Arreh, Chee! Chee! Chee!” (391) etc. adds the flavor of Indian local dialect. The words like “Lahnee”(378), “fuller” (379), “wit ous” (405) etc. are the perfect examples of patois Indians use in South Africa. Dramatist’s love for this mixed language and accent could be seen in the dialogue which seems almost direct address to the colonizers, “You’ll laughing because I’m speaking English this way. Just imagine how I’m laughing when you-all talking Tamil.” (402)

As the play belongs to the second generation of the Indians staying in South Africa, many glimpses of presenting Indianness could be seen. For example the narration of the movie “Khabi Khabi” (397) or the road name “Koonjebharie Road” (396), or mention of Indian dance “Natchannia” (381) etc. With all these unique characteristics the play turns out the play of multi-ethnic group.

One has to accept that though the play owns many standing ovations, it is very slow in action. At many instances it stretches, even scenes are not parted. The major play between only three main characters Sunny, Stranger and Mothie extends in such a way that in absence of very powerful actors it will be hard to catch the attention of readers. As the play has many documental features and lack of the action sometime it turns monotonous. The character of Stranger many a time seems like the mouthpiece of writer himself and talks about social reforming. For instances, “You were born in this country, why should you be treated differently...” (391), “Just who the hell do they think they are? What makes them so damn superior?” (402).

The title of the play “Lahnee’s Pleasure” is very apt as the play revolves around the slave colonized mentality of the characters. As they have accepted this as their destiny and also see it as the key happiness. Other than exception of Stranger all other characters are happy in pleasing the Lahnee.

To conclude one can say the play is struggle between the two mentality one is, “If we think like that things will never change” (390) and other is, “When you want anything for nothing... fence, wall, everything disappears” (388). And finally play ends with the triumph of the second belief of asserting to the power. As Mothie willingly admits, “You want I must sing for you boss...” (408), “I can dance for you too, boss” (408).

Reference

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