

CHAPTER TWO

P. K. ATRE AND NOEL COWARD :
COMIC VISION : WITH REFERENCE TO
SASTAANG NAMASKAR AND THE VORTEX

P.K. ATRE AND NOEL COWARD

COMIC VISION: WITH REFERENCE TO THEIR TWO PLAYS:

SASTAANG NAMASKAR AND THE VORTEX

This Chapter aims at attempting in a more direct and specific way a comparison between P.K.Atre's Sastaang Namaskar and Noel Coward's The Vortex. This comparison is made to analyse various aspects of their comic vision.

In Sastaang Namaskar, Atre succeeds in creating humour through a series of devices like incongruity, degradation, automatism, situation, through characters, through physical attributes and through words (dialogues).

Rao Bahadur, an old man, is an eccentric. He is made after a physical exercise called prostrate obeissance alias (Sastaang Namaskar). Frequently he talks about the magical effects and uses of this physical exercise. He has three children. His daughters Shobhna and Meera are also somewhat whimsical like him. Shobhna loves the art of writing poetry and she is in love with a poet teacher Bhadrayu. Meera writes short stories continually. Rao Bahadur's son Siddheshwar is also eccentric and whimsical. He is mad after 'fortune-telling'. Every-where he talks about 'Saturn' and other stars favourable or unfavourable. Shantanu, the hunter is after Shobhna. Mallinath, who always engages himself in cheating young girls is after Meera. In the end Shobhna finds that Bhadrayu only

loves his art of poetry and nothing else. So she rejects him and accepts Shantanu as her husband. Meera runs away with Mallinath. But Shantanu finds them out. Mallinath is arrested. In the end Rao Bahadur gives the hands of Meera to Bhadrayu in marriage.

Atre exploits successfully the device of incongruity in Sastaang Namaskar. He shows his characters eccentric and whimsical. At the same time Atre places these eccentric characters against the 'normal' characters and thus he presents a humorous situation through incongruity. It is not quite adequate to create laughter by merely presenting the characters of eccentric nature. Those characters should be presented with sharp contrast to normal persons. Allardyce Nicoll writes:

" A comedy full of eccentric types ceases largely to be a cause of merriment. This explains the fact that in all our finest comedies we find as a central pivot a pair or a quartette of dramatic^S personae who are by no means absurd, and a-round them a body of mere eccentrics - characters who take their colouring from their contrast with the central figures" 1.

Atre is successful in creating such incongruous characters. His characters behave irrationally and whimsically. Atre presents many such characters in this play: Rao Bahadur, Siddheshwar, Bhadrayu, Shobhna and Meera. In contrast to them,

he presents Shantanu, Tripuri, Mallinath and Chandu - the normal characters to teach lessons to these eccentric characters. Thus by presenting the eccentrics as opposed to these normal characters he creates laughter. It is the incongruity of Rao Bahadur that presents the prime comic essence of Atre's play. His abnormality or incongruity is that he is obsessed with the exercise of prostrate obeissance (sastaang namaskar) and everywhere like a chatterbox he tells the magical and mystic uses of this physical exercise. His madness about this physical exercise takes him to such an extent that he says that nothing is impossible if one does this exercise every morning. Dr. S.S.Bbosale writes:

"It is found that there are both 'normal' and 'abnormal' types of persons.... But when the normal type of people become abnormal, they first become the subject of sympathy, then pity, and in the end ridicule [Trans.] 2.

(अवतीभवती "नार्मल" तशी "अबनार्मल" दोन्ही प्रकारची माणसे असतात पण "नार्मल" मंडळी "अबनार्मल" होतात तेव्हा पहिल्यांदा ती सहानुभूतीचा नंतर दयेचा आणि शेवटी उपहासाचा विषय होतात.)

Rao Bahadur becomes the subject of ridicule. His love for prostrate obeissance is unlimited and this creates laughter. His inconsistent and eccentric talk creates mirth. Another incongruous man is Rao Bahadur's son Siddheshwar. He is also

portrayed as whimsical and eccentric. His incongruous behaviour takes us to merriment. He is mad after fortune - telling. He relates everything to the fate and to God 'Saturn'. His incongruous references to God 'Saturn' and his talk on number 'nine' creates laughter. Whenever he appears on the stage he talks about fortune, fate and God 'Saturn'. His talk is so ludicrous and inconsistent that sometimes he becomes the subject of both laughter and pity. Then incongruous nature is seen in the character of Bhadrayu too. He is a budding poet and desperately tries to write poems. He recites some of his poems to Shobhna who is also mad after poetry. His attempts to recite poems and at the same time tempt Shobhna create laughter. He is so much influenced by the English and Marathi Romantic poets that he naively tries to imitate them. Atre's parody of some of the romantic poets is very effective. The poet Bhadrayu has written many odes like Marathi Romantic poets. The very title of these odes are funny and the subject of merriment. The titles like 'Ode to Five Coloured Parrot', 'Ode to the Child who Died of Smallpox' are funny and at the same time serve the purpose of attacking the Marathi Romantic poets. About the incongruity in this play Dr. S.S.Bhosale writes:

" The chatterbox Rao Bahadur who is mad after prostrate obeisance, then the poet Bhadrayu who drinks the milk of cow because he thinks that the milk of buffalo is hard to digest and so it becomes difficult to write poetry, and

then the man Siddheshwar who adds his madness of fortune telling into the madness of his father Rao Bahadur,.... with the help of these different characters, Atre beautifully portrays a lot of ludicrous things "(Trans.)³

[साष्टांग नमस्काराचे पराकोटीचे वेड असलेले, पचापचा बोलणारे राव-बहाददूर म्हशीचे दूध पचावयास कठीण त्यामुळे कविता लिहावयास त्रास पडतो म्हणून नेहमी नेहमी गायीचे दूध पिणारा..... कवी भद्रायू, रावबहाददूर या आपल्या पित्याच्या वेडात स्वतःचे राशिभविष्याचे वेड मिश्रणारा सिद्धेश्वर अशा विविध पात्रांच्या आधारेने अश्यांनी अनेक हास्यास्पद गोष्टींचे फर्मास चित्रण केले आहे.]

In this play, Atre not only portrays a character who is physically deformed but the laughter is created through the mental deformity of characters. Allardyce Nicoll writes:

" We laugh not so much at the mere physical deformities as at the deformities brought about ^{by} mental action or by foolish habit " 4.

The characters of Rao Bahadur, Siddheshwar are not physically deformed. Their very habits are ridiculous. Siddheshwar's foolish habit of fortune-telling always exposes himself and he becomes the subject of ridicule. His habit of fortune-telling makes him an abnormal man and he turns out himself to be

a fool. His foolish habit degrades him and he becomes the object of laughter.

Then physical deformity is seen when Mallinath compares the beauty of Meera to the artificial beauty of Tripuri, a fashionable woman.

Mallinath: It needs a man of sharp intellect to know the false beauty of Tripuri. Any woman can beautify herself like Tripuri by the use of things like an artificial set of hair of Rs. 5, scented oil of Rs.2, a soap of four annas, face-powder of two annas and some colour of one anna (Sastaang Namaskar: Act 2 P.45) [Trans.] 5.

[मल्लीनाथ : त्रिपुरीच्या सौंदर्याचा नकलीपणा लक्षात यायला
सुक्ष्म बूदीचा माणूस पाहिले आहे. पाच रुपयाचे गंगावन, दोन रुपयाचे सुगंधी तेल, चार आण्याचा साबण, दोन आण्याची पावडर आणि एक आण्याचा रंग एवढ्या साहित्यावर कोणत्याही स्त्रीला त्रिपुरीसारखी सौंदर्यभूषा सजवता येई.]

The description of Mallinath of the artificial beauty of Tripuri, is a comment on physical deformity. Thus Atre parodies the modern fashionable women.

Atre fully exploits the mental deformity of characters like Bhadrayu, Rao Bahadur, Siddheshwar and Shobhna. The stupid conceit of Rao Bahadur about prostrate obeissance gives

Atre the opportunity for the introduction of the risible. It is found that laughter comes not only from the sense of the mental deformity of Rao Bahadur, but also from the sense that this particular 'humour' that controls his character. It is also seen that the characters like Siddheshwar, the poet Bhadrayu, Shobhna are merely tools of their 'humours'. Rao Bahadur's commentry about his love of prostrate obeissance and that everything is possible through this exercise and that he does this exercise whenever he gets the time reveals his character-flaw- his mental deformity. Rao Bahadur is completely a victim of his mental deformity and he merely becomes a machine, a chatterbox and thus becomes the subject of laughter. The incongruity found in the relationship between two characters like Bhadrayu and Shobhna, Siddheshwar and Rao Bahadur, Shantanu and Tripuri becomes a mixed cause for laughter, the characters contributing something in themselves, much more in connection, with words and situation playing almost equal parts. Allardyce Nicoll Writes:

" More commonly, as we have seen, the incongruity is presented not as an inner conflict, but as a contrast between two eccentric figures" 6.

Merriment results not only from a portrayal of vices, it is directed against eccentricities, against extremes of any kind, like that of Rao Bahadur and Siddheshwar, Shobhna and Bhadrayu.

Situation gives great opportunity to Atre to create laughter in this play. Atre presents situations based upon the principle of degradation. He presents the character of Rao Bahadur in a serious situation. Rao Bahadur's lectures and comments on the exercise of prostrate obeissance are serious and full of wisdom for young people. But he goes on commenting on it forever and the serious subject becomes ridiculous. The budding poet Bhadrayu is so absorbed in reciting his poems to Shobhna, that this situation itself creates laughter. Even some of the serious titles of his poems become funny in the situation. At times the situation is incongruous. It is shown that Shobhna loves the poet Bhadrayu but suddenly she gives up her love for him because of his feebleness and then she falls in love with Shantanu. Then Mallinath, who has made Tripuri his victim, runs away with Meera. Mallinath is arrested by the police and to the surprise of readers and audience, Rao Bahadur gives his daughter to the poet Bhadrayu. This incongruity arises partly out of the events themselves and partly out of the conflict between the characters and the events.

There is also the contrast between two persons, who may be both eccentric, or one eccentric and the other normal, or both normal. Thus Atre obtains a finely ludicrous effect from the situations in this play.

Atre's 'Sastaang Namaskar' is not only the comedy of 'humours' and situations, it is also the comedy of Manners. The manners are often expressed through the situation and the

reflections of the characters. The awkwardness of Shantanu in the circle of poets like Bhadrayu and Shobhna is very amusing. Same is the case with Tripuri who feels rather awkward in the company of Mallinath and Siddheshwar. Atre makes fun of Shobhna, Bhadrayu, Rao Bahadur, Shantanu and Tripuri. He makes fun of their habits, fashions, hobbies, way of behaving and talking. He parodies modern fashionable women through the painted face of Tripuri. He shows Mallinath in love with Meera, Meera's elopement with him, and Bhadrayu's vain attempts to write romantic poetry. Bhadrayu adopts the airs and the actions of the Marathi and English romantic poets. All these are found in the comedy of manners. These things become things of laughter. Rao Bahadur's character and manners are amusing because this old man is a slave of such manners. Allardyce Nicoll Writes :

" Along with the physical appearance, with the character, and with the situation goes what we may style manners... The manners, of course, are often expressed through the medium of the situation and of the words, and they themselves are reflections of character" 7.

Atre's art of uncanny dialogues is a great source^r of humour. Atre is a master of dialogue. His dialogues are clever, ingenious, brilliant and lastly revealing the finer shades of character. He has very little to do with the mechanical plot. He puts together several episodes and sometimes they remain separate. It is by the interlocking^{interlocking} of dialogues

that they are brought into relation. The dialogue is the connecting link in the whole drama. The comic tone and spirit and the whole drift of the play are conveyed to us by means of dialogues. And it seems to have been particularly invented by his comic genius, and in it, it finds his best expression. P.K. Atre makes dialogue the main instrument in his comedy, and by it and not by action, is sustained the interest of his play. Dr. S.S.Bhosale writes:

" With 'Sastaang Namaskar', Atre broke the tradition of ~~plot~~ plot-bound play and sowed the seed of shouldering the whole play by means of comic dialogues. He tried to sow this seed in the mindⁿ of audience on two levels. Firstly, by humour and fine display of dialogues and secondly, by the solid authority of the technique of dramatic art" (Trans.)⁸.

(कथानक प्रधान नाटकाची बैठक मोडून केवळ विनोद प्रचुर संवाद शैलीवर नाटक पेलून धरण्याचे बीज "साष्टांग नमस्कार" ने पहिल्यांदा पेरले. हे बीज गर्दीच्या मनात रुजविण्याचे काम अश्यांनी दोन आघाड्यावर पार पाडले. एक विनोदाच्या, संवादाची आतषबाजी आणि दोन नाट्यगत तंत्राच्या आखंबंद हकमतीच्या)

P.K. Atre rejects the old technique and convention of Kolhatkar, Khadilkar and Gadkari and follows^w an instinct of his own. It is his fancy and verbal wit that gives the unique character to his comedy. It is found that even the stupid

characters are here made witty and that there is a surfeit of wit. The dialogues are no doubt, from beginning to end, a continuous sparkling of polish and point. In fact, all the characters in the play could be given the common designation of wits. The character of Rao Bahadur is full of verbal wit. His every word and phrase creates humour. His commentary on the exercise of prostrate obeissance is a funny side of this comedy. Siddheshwar's typical use of words like 'Shani', 'Stars' and 'numbers' creates humorous situation. He talks about the fore-telling column in the newspapers. He tells you the 'auspicious time' for starting a new business. He chooses brilliant phrases to show that he is an expert in astrology and fortune-telling. But at the same time his dialogues create laughter as they look odd in the situation. Bhadrayu's dialogues on the art of poetry and his poems are the very subjects of ridicule. The titles of the poems, imitating and mocking the titles of the romantic poets are also the subjects of laughter.

Noel Coward's play 'The Vortex' is a comedy of manners. He succeeds in creating laughter through a series of devices like incongruity, degradation, automatism, situation, through characters, through physical attributes, and above all through words (dialogues).

In this well-made play, there is incongruity of characters but it is marginal. It is the incongruity between two contrasting situations that presents the twin qualities of wit and of humour. The heroine, Florence Lancaster, has a love-affair with a man young enough to be her son, and in fact exactly the same age

as her son. At the same time her son Nicky is in love with a young girl called Bunty. As Florence Lancaster comes home with her lover Tom Veryan, her son Nicky unexpectedly arrives there and informs them that he is engaged to a girl called Bunty Mainware. These two love-affairs of the mother and her son are contrasting and the incongruity arising out of it creates laughter. Incongruity is also seen when we compare normal characters with abnormal characters. This contrast creates laughter. The normal characters are Helen and Pawnie and abnormal characters are Florence and her son Nicky. The abnormal and whimsical behaviour of Florence and Nicky alone cannot create laughter but when the normal characters surround them, the incongruity arises which creates laughter. Florence and Nicky are at the centre; the other characters like Helen, Pawnie and Tom Veryan surround them. Alardyce Nicoll writes:

" The endeavour to institute a comparison between two sets of characters is of the essence of the comic conflict, it is a feature of modern drama just as it was a feature of the drama of ancient Rome". 9

Thus the normality of Helen, Pawnie and Tom is opposed to the abnormality and eccentricity of Florence and Nicky.

There are no characters suffering from physical deformity. But we find mental deformity or foolish habits of the characters. This mental deformity causes laughter. Florence Lancaster is mentally deformed. Though she has a husband, she has a habit of

flirting with young men. She considers herself to be a good society woman, but at the same time she goes to a matinee with a young man Tom. Through Helen and Pawnie we come to know that she is an abnormal and mentally eccentric woman who loves young men in order to sustain her beauty. While Nicky's mental deformity is caused due to his indulgence in drug-taking. Though Coward portrays normal characters round the abnormal characters for creating laughter, his another aim is to expose the immoral.

In this play Noel Coward succeeds in creating laughter through presenting different types of characters. Character is one of the highest and richest media for humour. Mental deformity of Florence Lancaster may not be a vice, but must be a folly. She thinks that she can keep herself young forever by flirting with young men. This is her stupid conceit. This stupid conceit of Florence gives Coward opportunity to create laughter. Our laughter comes, not from the sense of the mental deformity, but from the sense that the particular figure like Florence is possessed by her mental deformity. The same happens with Nicky who suffers from his deformity. Florence lives in the world of shallowness and emptiness. Nicky lives in the world of drugs. But finally these two characters save each other. Both come to know that they are the victims of their own nature. Both come to know that they are becoming the subjects of laughter. This revelation saves them.

Noel Coward's situations lead us to laughter and the laughable. However, situations offer an opportunity only for the introduction of a very limited kind of laughter. In this play it is seen that the two characters Helen and Pawie are polite, decent and innocent persons. On ~~the~~ the other hand, Florence Lancaster is somewhat immoral. Florence's repeated attempts to keep herself young by keeping the company of young men are themselves ludicrous. Again the situation becomes laughable when we find Florence with her lover Tom Veryan and Florence's son with his mistress Bunty Mainwaring. This is really funny situation because this situation involves the love-affairs of both the mother and the son. It is amusing to watch Florence following Tom Veryan and begging for 'love'. Then both Florence and her son Nicky find that their own lovers Tom and Bunty are kissing each other. This situation is the comic climax of the play. Both Florence and Nicky become angry as they see their lovers in each others arms. Though this infuriates them, this situation makes us laugh. The situation which is based on the principle of degradation at the end of the play creates laughter. Florence's repeated attempts to appease her lover Tom Veryan is the instance of her degradation. Even though her son is present, she follows Tom Veryan and asks for 'love'. This situation of her degradation is the subject of laughter. Then Nicky's attempts to persue Bunty Mainwaring to win her heart is the instance of his degradation which is also the subject of laughter.

As this play is Coward's brilliant comedy of manners, it is entirely a play of dialogues of wit. The play has very little plot, it entirely depends on verbal wit and elegance of dialogue. The dialogue is the principal excellence of this comedy. The comic mood is brilliantly created by witty dialogues between the characters. Coward is a master of dialogue. These clever, ingenious, and brilliant dialogues reveal the finer shades of character. The dialogue is the connecting link in the whole drama. The comic tone of this play is conveyed to us by means of the dialogues. And it seems to have been particularly invented by his comic genius. The first act starts with exposition unashamed. The two friends Pawnie and Helen discuss in heroine's absence her love-affair with a young man called Tom Veryan. The man is young enough to be her son, and, in fact, exactly the same age^{as} her son:

Pawnie : Who is this boy ?

Helen : Tom Veryan. You must have seen him.

Pawnie : Florence's past, present or future ?

Helen : Present

Pawnie : He has that innocent look that never fails
to attract elderly women

Helen : Don't be a cat.

Pawnie : I wasn't meaning Florence, she's too divine
to be in any marked category

(The Vortex: The Play Parade: Act 1, P.168) 10

The above dialogues between Pawnie and Helen are short, compact but witty and reveal that a married heroine who has a marriageable son is in love with a young boy Tom Veryan. Through such dialogues Coward reveals the heroine's nature and at the same time creates laughter.

To conclude, both Atre and Coward are masters in the field of Theatre. They both succeed in creating laughter out of situation, out of incongruity and degradation. Both excel in the art of characterisation. But it is seen that Noel Coward has an inborn sense of Theatre, a gift of repartee, and a natural verve which make his 'The Vortex' more than mere entertainment. Atre's play is very near to entertainment. Atre's dialogues are rather exaggerated and go beyond limit, so that they become the vehicle of second rate laughter.

It is true that both the plays have slender plots and the dramatists use dialogues to sustain the interest upto the end. The dialogues are only the bricks on which the whole action is built. But it is seen that the dialogues of Coward are sober, simple, lucid without any exaggeration. While Atre's dialogues suffer from exaggeration. They are rather wordy. His dialogues arise out of derision. Comedy is to do us good through laughter, but not through derision; not just counteract those faults at which it laughs. Coward's humour is light and his wit is reduced to modish sophistication and sentimentality. Atre's

humour is created by presenting contradictory situations and characters. His characters behave like fool and thus his laughter looks somewhat crude. Coward's humour is created through his stylistic coherence which Atre lacks.

R E F E R E N C E S

1. Allardyce Nicoll, (Ed.), The Theory of Drama (Delhi: Doaba House, 1974) p.196
2. Dr. S.S. Bhosale, Sahitya aani Samiksha (Kolhapur: Ajab Pustakalaya, 1976) p. 147
3. Ibid., P.,150
4. Allardyce Nicoll, (Ed.), The Theory of Drama (Delhi: Doaba House, 1974) p. 201
5. P.K. Atre: Sastaang Namaskar, Act 2 P. 45
6. Allardyce Nicoll, (Ed.), The Theory of Drama (Delhi: Doaba House, 1974) p. 203
7. Ibid., pp. 205-206
8. Dr. S.S.Bhosale, Sahitya aani Samiksha (Kolhapur: Ajab Pustakalaya, 1976) p. 148
9. Allardyce Nicoll, (Ed.), The Theory of Drama (Delhi: Doaba House, 1974) p. 197
10. Noel Coward, The Vortex: The Play Parade, Act 1 p. 16