

Man-Woman Relationship in Poile Sengupta's *Alipha*: A Study

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Abstract: *Poile Sengupta's play Alipha offers a realistic picture of man-woman relationship in a traditional Indian society where women, in spite of all their efforts to acquire education and self-reliance, remain on the margin. They may be good teachers, but they are made to learn bitter lessons of life by the patriarchy that is still in no mood to accord them equal status. In spite of all the progress that our society has made, women are still subservient to men and their life is, by and large, governed by the male members of the family and society. Man-woman relationship is marked by inequality. It is premised on the binary of subject/object, superior/inferior and colonizer/colonized. Women, in the play, are objects of male pleasure and gaze. They exist for men. They have no rights and autonomy. Their body is the battlefield where Male Ego violates Women's chastity and honour and, having lost them to men, they naturally become their trophy. Their relationship is like a game whose rules are framed to favour men. In the play, the Woman, her aunty and her disciple, Devi are all caught up in the web of patriarchy from which their coming out is impossible. The present study seeks to discuss Man-woman relationship in the play, Alipha, stressing the fact that as long as women are dependent on men, their misery will not be over. Their emancipation lies in their education and self-reliance. But it is a long battle which will require many sacrifices and if they are ready to make sacrifices, they will surely win it.*

Keywords: - *Alipha, Man, Woman, Devi, Patriarchy.*

Poile Sengupta is one of the most prominent women playwrights of contemporary Indian English literature. Most of her plays like *Mangalam*, *Inner Laws*, *Keats was a Tuber*, *Thus Spake Soorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni* and *Samara's Song* deal primarily with the life of women characters. *Alipha* is no exception. This play addresses the

issues of women and is written from their perspective. It discusses how women are first sexually abused and then are relegated to the background. Its protagonist is an unnamed person called Woman whose life is directly affected by the life and action of the unnamed Man. Their socio-economic background varies- the Man is rich, while the

Woman is poor. She depends on him for her upbringing, education and survival. Sengupta's dramatic skill lies in handling them together on stage though they "do not ever meet on stage"(215). The play, within its limited canvas, covers the events of twenty years. The title of the play, Sengupta says, was suggested by the very first letter of the Urdu alphabet:

Alipha-the title was inspired by 'aliph', the first letter of the Urdu alphabet and reminiscent of the word 'alphabet' itself-tells the parallel stories of a social activist and a politician in small town India. The two narratives are like pieces in a jigsaw Puzzle that are put together by the audience as the play progresses. The girl and the Man-they remain nameless-do not ever meet on stage; their acting areas, and their worlds, explicitly demarcated and exclusively their own (215).

The play copiously exploits *Janantika* and *Apavaritaka* (private personal address and concealed speaking respectively)- the method of stage presentation as suggested by Bharata Muni in *Natya Shastra*. In the play, two characters speak alternately sharing

their ideas and feelings which are meant to be heard only by characters on stage. The method of the play can aptly be compared to that of Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologue. The Woman's words are addressed to her friend Asma, while those of the Man are addressed to an invisible servant or someone who listens to him passively. The playwright presents their life in a way that seems detached, but, in fact, it is closely linked. The playwright says, " The two narratives are so carefully constructed that they run parallel yet they move forward independently. The girl's story "travels across two decades, the man's is told in real time, in the space of a single evening"(215).

In the play, we have two sets of people. The set of men includes the unnamed Man, his politician father and the postman, while that of women includes the unnamed Woman, her aunty, her disciple Devi and her imaginary friend, Asma. All the women are dependent on men for their financial security and fulfilment, while the Man depends on the aunty for his physical fulfilment. His father is a selfish politician, while the postman is the bridge between the aunty

and the Man, i.e., he introduces her to him. All the women lead a life of restrictions and they feel like Maya Angelou's "caged bird". The play deals with a small town-politics where politicians make false promises and claim to eradicate all kinds of inequality and establish love, brotherhood and equality. However, these trivial issues serve as the "backdrop to human emotions-love, lust, greed, anger, hate and revenge. In Alipha, ultimately, it is the personal tragedy of the characters, the waste of human endeavour, which is paramount"(215).

The play opens with the voice of the Woman who is seen talking to Asma, an imaginary friend of hers. This shows the hollowness of her life which she tries to overcome by communicating with someone who does not exist. She is in a state of mental vacuum and, so, she soliloquizes most of the time, thereby giving vent to her pent-up feelings. Having lost her parents before she could see the light of the day (Her father had died a few weeks before her birth, and her mother died while giving birth to her), she was brought up by the aunty. The aunty gets her admitted to an

English medium school. She wants her to study hard to succeed in life. Therefore, she even beats her whenever she is careless about studies. On the other hand, the Man has been rusticated from school for misbehaving with his woman teacher. He has no regret for what he has done. He says,

I was young... untried... innocent too in a way... innocent (Laughs) yes alright... there were those episodes in college.... But it was all done with consent. I was just bloody unlucky with that lecturer woman. She wouldn't keep her mouth shut. My father would have paid her off, you know. And anyway, what the hell... I merely put my hand down the front of her blouse... it was a bet... that's all. And I paid for it... I've paid for it in every way...(223).

This is what the spoiled sons of wealthy politicians do. They misbehave with every girl and woman and go scot free until they come across someone who has the courage not to yield to their power and pressure.

So, he is exiled to a villa by his politician father who is more bothered about keeping his political image clean than counselling his son to make him a

better youth. He has no time for him. So with the help of the postman, he gets in touch with the Woman's aunty and sleeps with her on a regular basis. She gives him her body, he gives her his (his father's) money. Both satisfy each-other's needs.

Though the Man and the Woman lead different lives, one thing is common in their life- both feel lonely, unwanted and deserted. The girl has lost her parents and she depends on her aunty, while the Man is exiled by his father and he also depends on the Woman's aunty. Both, in a way, depend on the same woman though for different reasons. The Woman depends on her for her education and survival, the Man, for his physical needs and pleasure. The Woman wants her around all the time, he needs her only at night. She is emotionally connected with her, while his relationship with her is only physical. The aunty is only an object of pleasure to him. He is so besotted with her that he passes his entire day waiting for the night. He says,

“I couldn't stay away from her... she was the next cigarette... the next drink...the drugged forgetting...hard unending

pleasure.... The entire day was a waiting for the night...the darkness...the backdoor...her smell...her hair along my thighs...her hands exploring... It was only her...always her...spheres and hollows...her whispers...” (221).

She stands for a delectable body for him and nothing else. This objectification of women is poignantly captured by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*:

She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute- she is the Other(xxii).

In the play, both the Man and the aunty satisfy each-other's needs. But the Man is the subject while the aunty, a woman, is the object. He commands and she obeys. He is the colonizer and she is the one who is colonized. This binary relationship between Man and Woman is aptly described in the colonial context by Susan Sontag in her essay, " The

Third World of Women"(1973), "Women live in an imperialist situation in which men are colonialists and women are natives"(184). In this world women are treated as 'objects' and not as human beings.

Human life is essentially governed by the financial condition. The life of all the women characters (the Woman, her aunty and her disciple, Devi) is marked by poverty and dependence on men (the Man and his politician father), while that of men by financial soundness and opulence. That is why key male characters are not seen labouring for money, while women are working hard for it. The postman and the Woman's dead father's life may be an exception in the play.

Sometimes life conceals what only death reveals. As long as the aunty was alive, the Woman did not know anything about the real identity of her deceased parents and the postman. Her death unravels the mystery that the postman was her own uncle, her "dead father's older brother"(229). It also transpires that her father" was a genius in his studies but he was also a wild sort

of person, always fighting for people's rights and so on"(229). He was "a first class first in the University"(229). His only sin was that he tried to break a taboo by marrying a widow for which he was disowned by his own family. He moved from place to place looking for a job, but he could bag only the job of a cook. The story of her father proves that widow remarriage was not permitted in the past. If anyone tried to go against the traditional practices, they would run the risk of being boycotted and disowned both by the family and the society. It was difficult for a widow to get a good job, so they were forced to enter the profession of prostitution. And the man who married a widow ran the same risk. In the play, the death of the Woman's aunty and the Man's mother is described alternately. Their death is a shock to both of them. The Woman loses her aunty, her source of income and is forced to quit education. The Man loses his mother and his bed-partner. Neither of them could come to terms with the loss they suffered.

The Woman's poverty forces her out of school and she is compelled to take a job in the garment factory of the Man's

father. Her job at first was to take care of the children of the factory workers at the anganwadi centre run by a voluntary organisation of the city. Then, after some days, she starts teaching them and other adult women. Her method of teaching is appreciated by all and the women start sharing the issues of their personal life with her which saddens her heart. The Woman describes their miserable condition:

How unhappy these women are! What a miserable life they lead. It's not just the poverty. That's bad enough. It's also the rules that they have to follow... because they are women. So many rules. Keep your legs closed...keep your mouth shut. Don't dress up too much because a man will get attracted to you. Don't make demands because the man might get angry with you. Don't wear scent. Don't let the jasmine dangle in your hair. Don't swing your hips like a prostitute. Don't smile. Don't laugh (233).

It is through the character of the Woman that Sengupta projects her feminist concerns in the play. Like the Woman, Sengupta, too, wants to be instrumental in spreading women's education so that all the women of India may be educated

and become self-reliant. The Woman simplifies the stories from the epics for women. This facilitates their learning and understanding. Her disciple, Devi, therefore, blames Gandhari for blindfolding herself for life. In her opinion, she should have become her husband's eyes and should have shown him the reality so that the war could have been averted.

The Woman's education changes the lives of many women. They are able to guide their school-going children. They are now enlightened and feel empowered and begin to claim their fundamental and legal rights. The Woman says that now "They insist that the drains outside their homes are cleaned...they supervise the children's school work as much as they can...they even ask the doctor questions. How intelligent they are! How strong"(235)! In the play, Sengupta, in ensuring education to poor women, resembles Lynne Segal who, in her work "Why Feminism?"(1999), envisages " a world which is a better place not just for some women, but for all women. In what I still call a socialist feminist vision, that

would be a far better world for boys and men, as well"(qtd. in Walters,139).

After the death of the aunty, the Man asks the postman to make some other arrangement. But his refusal to help him infuriates him and he threatens to get him arrested on false charges. But he gets no help from his DSP friend. So he creates a huge base for himself to become a power to reckon with. He wanted all men and women to cringe before him. He works hard for eight-nine years and becomes a powerful leader of a trade union. He is driven by a motive of revenge and so he becomes responsible for the end of the career of his politician father. He considers himself "the modern Shakuni"(234) who conquers all his enemies. He gets the DSP "sent off on a punishment posting"(234) and gets the postman killed. He is drunk with power which is more intoxicating than alcohol. Having conquered all that he wanted, he felt the absence of the aunty. The "whiff of jasmine"(234) emanating from her body still haunted her.

The Man now controls the garment factory and his men supervise everything. There is a woman teacher

who steals milk and food meant for children's mid-day meal. Devi catches her red-handed. The teacher is a girlfriend of Babu, an aide of the Man. The Man pretends to be unbiased in his inquiry and judgement and is judged to be as "kingly and handsome"(237) as Lord Rama. But the Woman finds this Man with gooseberry eyes to be a demon like Ravana. On the other hand, the Man considers himself Shakuni who is driven solely by the revenge-motive. The Woman finds the Man's gaze bad, while he finds in her a reflection of the aunty.

No women's group, in its revolution, can easily become successful against the patriarchal system. The Woman, Devi and other women have only angered Babu and his master by humiliating Babu's girlfriend. Devi is raped and murdered "with a bicycle chain"(239). Women stage a protest but to no avail. The Woman fears that she might be killed as well and her fear proves to be true and she is also murdered.

The above discussion proves that the relationship between Man and Woman is based on the age-old binary of ruler/ruled, giver/receiver,

aggressive/submissive, subject/object and colonizer/colonized. The life of women, from the beginning to the end of the play, is a long, sad tale with very little hope of change in the face of crushing patriarchy. The dependence of women on men is an ancient story that is repeated time and again. Both Eve and Shradha were created for Adam and Manu respectively. So women were never conceived to be autonomous beings. They were, are and will be seen only in relation to men- only as subservient to men, with no autonomy and no rights. Man-Woman relationship is lopsided. It will take a lot of doing on the part of women to be on a par with men, and it can be possible if could be made to think that the world can be made a better place if both the genders are on the same plane.

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