



The ephemerality in ‘humane’ existence: Understanding *Begum Ka Takiya* as a parable

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Abstract— Pandit Anand Kumar’s *Begum Ka Takiya*, was first published in 1985 as a drama. The work has been adapted by the National School of Drama, New Delhi which staged the play in 2010, directed by Ranjit Kapoor, and subsequently, several other theatre groups performed the play around the country.

Begum Ka Takiya explores the ethical dilemmas of human life through the confrontation of several fundamental questions. It attains the quality of a parable in being morally didactic by giving out an ideal message otherwise forgotten in the modern utilitarian world. The paper focuses on one such primary aspect which the author emphasizes on: the temporality of human lives and everything associated with it. The play reiterates the factual and philosophical truth of the ephemeral nature of time in human lives as well as all the elementary things that one thrives for in a lifetime. Every individual is subject to the test of time and fate; however, it is the persistence of fatefulness through ethical perseverance that makes one’s existence fundamentally ‘humane’. The paper explores the ‘humane’ understanding of the ephemeral nature of human lives through a study of the play as directed by Ranjit Kapoor and performed by the National School of Drama Repertory Co. in continuous deliberation with the author himself.

Keywords— Ethics, Humane, Parable, Pandit Anand Kumar, Ranjit Kapoor, Utilitarianism.

A parable often aims at the ethical understanding of human lives to ensure a didactic or instructional, and simple but essential message. Parables and fables are not new in Indian culture with their deep-rooted relevance in several story-telling practices like the ‘*qissa*’ in Punjab, theatre and performance practices like the Bengali ‘*jatra*’, or the ‘*nataunki*’ popular in and around North India, along with the relevance of Arabian and Middle Eastern folk tales around the sub-continent. What differentiates a parable from a fable is its indulgence with human lives directly through issues of everyday life and not through the use of animals or inanimate objects as carriers to understand ethical problems of humans as the latter does. The paper explores the quintessential nature of a parable that *Begum Ka Takiya* is attributed with.

The playwright, Pandit Anand Kumar is a noted icon in the film industry and the field of Hindi literature. Notably, he was awarded the National Film Award for

screenwriting and scriptwriting for the film, *Anokhi Raat* (1968). He regularly writes in Hindi, Urdu, and Marathi. *Begum Ka Takiya* was first published in 1985 as a drama. However, it earned compelling attention a few years later when Ranjit Kapoor, theatre director and alumnus of the infamous National School of Drama in New Delhi, decided to adapt the work into a play. Pandit Anand Kumar gave the adaptation a go despite his initial reservations about the actors misinterpreting the emotions of the characters as he meant them to be. He visited and assisted the preparations of the team assigned to perform the play and ensured that the adaptation would not manipulate the fundamental essence of his original work. Subsequently, the play was also adapted by few other renowned theatre directors and was performed by distinguished theatre groups like the Hum Theatre Group of Bhopal among others.

Begum Ka Takiya confronts the ethical paradoxes of the contemporary modern society. The basic human values of trust, belief, and empathy are problematized in a capitalist world where everyone is looking for material gains. The novel starts with the *murshid's* or the teacher's confrontation with his student who is in a dilemma of everything that he sees and experiences around him. On his quest to understand and incorporate '*fakiri*', the *mureed* /student is evermore confused and is looking for ways to transcend from everything in the world which seems to lure and entice humans, as a part of his journey of becoming an enlightened ascetic. '*Fakiri*', therefore, becomes a philosophical position that the play takes through Dariya Shah to acknowledge the questions by Katra Shah. It is the position of transcending from all the desires in the world to live the life of an ascetic. The duo address these fundamental human dilemmas through the lives of the people in the fictional setting of Baghdaar.

It is the theme of time, fate, and temporality that gives *Begum Ka Takiya* its significant parable factor. The play becomes a spectacle of life where every person is being tested in one way or the other as the litmus test of time is inevitable to be faced by everyone. While Peera is being tested through his dire poverty, Meera is being tested through the wealth and his overnight rise to a rich businessman.

The idea that nothing in the world is permanent and human life is dynamic, is reiterated several times in the play. Dariya Shah, as his name itself suggests, embodies human fate in the form of a '*dariya*' or a river. The omniscient character in the play becomes the metaphor for time flowing like his namesake, which is the '*river*', going through the path of every character. The same temporality is associated with wealth by Dariya Shah in the introductory monologue when he stresses on how wealth and material possessions simply go from one hand to another and it is only the lack of patience or '*sabr*' that makes humans poor and not the actual lack of material wealth.

DARIYA SHAH: Wealth has nothing to do with being poor...consider wealth as the water in a river... just as the water flows around and comes back, similarly, wealth returns to the place it belongs.

Time acts as the predominant and inevitable truth of human lives. However, it is the test of time and fate, when faced ethically, that makes one's existence '*humane*'. In the play, Peera's adherence to the ethical values of trust and honesty is problematized in a utilitarian setting. Despite the worst conditions that he has to suffer, Peera never agrees to use the money assigned to him by Dariya

Shah for the job of building the *takiya*. Suffering through dire poverty simply makes him more prone to empathize with the suffering of others. On the other hand, his brother Meera makes a fortune by claiming wealth that does not belong to him. Meera represents the utilitarian stance of the capitalist world where one is only concerned about oneself. However, we witness how his wealth does not last for long and it is bestowed back to the villagers in the form of the '*takiya*'. The community of the village of Baghdaar consists of everyday workers struggling to meet their ends through whatever menial job they can find. But their consciousness is not sabotaged with extreme greed like that of Meera's. Even when they are offered four times the money to build the *mahal* (palace) for Meera's wife Raunki, at Dariya Shah's shed, they deny doing so. The villagers eventually would not see injustice materializing through them. They reiterate that their '*humane*' existence cannot be purchased through any sum of money.

The readers also witness the primary human fate of suffering in the novel. Apart from the dire condition of poverty that most of the villagers suffer from, the idea of suffering is also manifested in the loss of Ameena and Peera's son. The loss of their child is the sacrifice Peera and Ameena had to go through to endure the pre-eminence of time in human lives. However, Peera is rewarded with wealth for his perseverance in protecting the land meant for the *takiya*, hence proving the circular nature of material possessions in life. Dariya Shah emphasizes that the gone is something one can do nothing about, but one can thrive to live for things in the present and things in posterity.

DARIYA SHAH: Do not grieve for what has

been taken away, be thankful for what has been given again.

The fact that at the end of the play only one thing is permanent, that is, the *takiya* or shelter-house, reimposes the overarching idea of ephemerality in the play. It is because that the very concept of a shelter-house or *musafirkhana* is meant for temporary refuge for *musafirs* or travellers who would stay at the place for a few days and eventually leave the place. Therefore, the '*takiya*' becomes the embodiment of temporality in human life and its existence.

One cannot ignore the omniscient nature of Dariya Shah when it comes to the addressing of events happening in the play. As a metaphor for time, Dariya Shah controls the fate of every individual throughout their being. Katra Shah, hence becomes the *mureed* /student to the *murshid* /teacher, being guided to fathom the ultimate reality of time and temporality. He indeed becomes the ideal student, filled with questions and confusions about life and its material enigma of wealth, greed, and lust,

hence, representing the everyman suffering from the dilemma that life in itself is.

The play also questions the concept of madness through the character of Peera, one whom the villagers often consider mad because of his selfless actions. The idea of being mad has often been problematically conceptualized in the contemporary materialistic world. One who is ready to hold onto the values of trust and belief is laughed upon and is considered insane. The truth of insanity, however, that the play recapitulates is the running behind of material wealth and the pursuit of a utilitarian existence of life which limits the very idea of human existence giving importance to the self while negating the notion of humans being social beings. The play, therefore, becomes a dialogic perspective on the concept of madness in the present world traversing the gap between the contemporary perception of sanity and insanity.

The realization of the temporality of everything that is, is the truth of humanity, and the practice of this realization through acceptance and understanding of ethical values like empathy, care, and compassion could be the metamorphoses from a 'human' towards an essentially 'humane' existence. *Begum Ka Takiya*, therefore, takes the philosophical position of 'fakiri', which is the manifestation of these 'humane' values, and further, an ideal way of living an ascetic life. It takes a stance to uphold the ethical practice of values in a contemporary utilitarian world. It might very well be true that the contemporary world is a race for everything, but the ethical understanding of humanity is something that should not be sabotaged in the process. Through a tale of a few people in a fictional setting of a village, Pandit Anand Kumar's work provides a cathartic experience for the readers, which is emphasized through the spectacle of a play as staged by Ranjit Kapoor, the outcome of which is a message well-put and a parable well-constructed.

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