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Oppression And Morality: An Analysis Of Manoj Mitra's Play 'Honey From A Broken Hive'

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Abstract: The play Honey from a Broken Hive, written by Manoj Mitra, explores various themes including animosity, oppression, women's subjugation, humanity, and dharma (duty) and moral rectitude. The play explores the moral and ethical dilemmas through the lens of caste and gender conflicts within the Indian context. Furthermore, the play prompts readers to reflect upon their own beliefs and values. This paper analyzes the societal issues of caste and gender as depicted in the play, as well as the challenges of maintaining morality within oppressive circumstances. The protagonist, Matla, is portrayed as someone torn between a Shakespearean "to be or not to be" mindset. Towards the end of the play, there is a vision of potential reorganization and redefinition of established power structures and orders. Manoj Mitra, a renowned Indian theatre artist, dramatist, and playwright, has written around 70 plays and filmscripts and has received several prestigious accolades, including the Sangeet Natak Award (1985). He also leads a theatre group called 'Sundaram' in Kolkata. In the play, Mitra presents the death of a man from a snakebite at ojha's house in a remote Indian village, narrating the story from a perspective of the downtrodden and deeply rooted in the realities of extreme poverty.

Index Terms - Oppression, Morality, Caste, Gender, Theatre of Conscience, Manoj Mitra.

I.INTRODUCTION

In Honey from a Broken Hive, Mitra (2007) delves into the conflict between societal elements, including class, caste, religion, profession, and gender, and individuals' morality and their will to act right. Certainly, the convergence of oppression and morality often gives rise to divergent ideologies and behaviors in the play. When individuals find themselves subjected to oppressive systems or circumstances, they may encounter moral quandaries as they deliberate how to respond. On the one hand, there is a moral imperative to act in accordance with virtuous principles and to champion societal well-being. On the other hand, these moral principles may clash with considerations of personal safety, which can impede one's ability to take action. This tension between advocating for what is right and navigating the practical realities of oppressive environments engenders intricate moral dilemmas that compel individuals to assess the repercussions of their choices in light of their ethical convictions. The focal point of the play revolves around Matla's predicament and the ensuing turmoil that engulfs his life. It explores the struggles faced by the characters as they grapple with these conflicting forces and make moral decisions in the face of oppression.

II.In the Crucible of Oppression: Morality Tested

The term 'morality' plays an immense role in the literature, particularly in the world of fiction. Indeed, morality is a part of everyone's life, as the principles that govern human conduct are defined by morality. Society will not be able to survive for long if these principles are not followed. Without doubt, morality influences a person's daily decisions, guided by their conscience.

Morality can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Etymologically, the term 'morality' has been derived from the Latin word 'mos,' which means custom or habit. The New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language define it as "concerned with right and wrong and the distinction between them, virtuous, good" (p. 649). According to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English, "Morality is a personal or social set of standards for good or bad behavior and character or the quality of being right, honest, or acceptable. To moralize is to express judgment on right and wrong" (p. 917). Since morality has been associated with ethics, it is very easy to get confused between these two terms. Ethics are the moral principles and doctrines that govern a person's behavior or conduct. Morality is concerned with the principles, doctrines, or notions of right and wrong behavior and the goodness or badness of human character.

Meanwhile, The Oxford Reference Dictionary defines morality as "principles concerning the difference between right and wrong or the extent to which an action is right or wrong" (p. 546). Thus, it can be assumed that morality implies distinguishing between what is right and what is wrong. It denotes what one believes to be right and wrong. Considering the various definitions mentioned above, it is evident that human beings have been associated with morality to some extent, and it helps a person differentiate between good and bad. Morality is affected by the individual, family, religion, caste, class, and culture. The definition of morality in the research study would mean living consciously within the frame of certain principles considered right and wrong, laid down by the society or community, the non-compliance of which can be emotionally disturbing.

2.1 Matla’s Humanity

Matla represents the embodiment of humanity in the play as he grapples with the conflicting forces of human nature, namely preservation and destruction. Matla confronts the challenging task of determining whether to extend a helping hand to save a life and fulfill his duties as an Ojha (traditional healer) or to allow death to befall an individual due to their cruel and inhumane nature. He vocalizes his anguish and confusion when confronted with difficult decisions that life presents.

The discrimination inflicted on Matla and the villagers is not only due to their caste but their economic powerlessness too. Hence, it is conspicuous that primarily the low caste identity of a person makes him deprived of all sorts of social amenities. Not only that, since Matla vividly portrays the appalling conditions under which he subsists, as he is unable to provide even two meals a day or alleviate the hunger and suffering of his pregnant daughter. Despite the scarcity of resources and means, Matla possesses virtues of character and humanity. Their impoverished economic situation is primarily a result of Ojhas being out of work, as their traditional healing skills have been superseded by Western medicine. According to the "Traditional Theory" or the "Brahmanical Theory," the caste system in India originated from the Vedic chaturvarna system, which was based on the division of labor and occupation. Over time, the Varna system gave rise to the caste system, resulting in the proliferation of jatis. Caste also determines the profession (basically menial jobs); low-caste people like Matla and Jata had no choice but to follow through and thereby remain poor. As Jata explains their state, "Matla, after such a long time, we've found a man with a wound. Snakes don't bite people anymore... such bad days these are... And when will they bite? Folks these days die without food... they don't wait for the bite of the snakes! Men have become jackals!" (p. 118).

This clearly highlights the dire circumstances they live in and how caste controls the financial and social status of a person. It creates a barrier to improving someone's class. And again, their low economic condition makes it easy for the upper caste to exploit them. Caste identity forces the lower castes to remain in the pit of obscurity and marginality.

2.2 Sense of Dharma (Duty) in Matla

Morality in the Indian context originates from the Vedic cosmic principle of Rta, which implies that there is an eternal moral order involved in the very constitution of the universe. As a result, man must adopt a moral point of view. Additionally, the Indian sense of morality is rooted in the concept of dharma or the moral law. The Indian outlook is spiritual, and the Indian moral system is oriented towards the spiritual goal of 'moksha' or deliverance.

Matla perceives his actions as his duty and rejects any notion of exploiting the situation for personal gain. He refuses Phukna's plea to stop saving the Master's life, insisting that he cannot face his deceased father if he abandons his duty and the sole responsibility bestowed upon him. He tells Phukna, "You know Phukna, Pa himself taught me the use of plants and medicines. Today, he comes to my mind. These two hands ache with longing! If you don't let me go, Pa of mine won't rest in peace even in the netherworld" (p. 159). It is through purposeful work and relationships that individuals find meaning in their lives. How could Matla forsake the only skill he has learned and cultivated throughout his life - the ability to heal a poisoned man and restore his life? Abandoning his duty would render his entire existence meaningless. Matla's internal struggle becomes evident as he grapples with the conflict between his sense of duty, his moral conscience, and societal expectations. On one hand, he feels obligated to his ancestors and bound by the teachings of his father, which emphasize the importance of honoring obligations and duty. On the other hand, Matla finds himself at odds with society and the majority of the villagers, who view the potential demise of the Master as a welcome liberation. This sentiment among the villagers arises from the Master's prolonged mistreatment and exploitation of the community. It becomes apparent that Matla and the rest of the community aspire not only to alleviate their financial debts but also to escape the Master's inhumane treatment. Against this backdrop, Matla experiences heightened conflicting emotions as he navigates his relationship with the villagers and his own family members.

When Matla finally rescues the Master and confesses his hidden resentment, he expresses a yearning for a fresh start. Matla acknowledges that throughout the process of rescuing the Master, he struggled with the desire to harm him, ultimately opting to save him. Matla recounts instances in which the Master caused him and his community harm, such as seizing their land, exploiting their labor, and even pilfering from them. Matla, laden with his own debts to the Master, is motivated to act in the hopes of saving the Master's life and securing a better future for his unborn grandchild. Matla envisions that his act of salvation may garner rewards such as money, land, or resources, or even the forgiveness of his own debts.

The playwright skillfully juxtaposes these conflicting elements within the narrative, emphasizing the intricate complexity of the play. The dynamic between the Master and Matla can be interpreted as one of oppression and subjugation. Despite being marginalized and mistreated, the oppressed characters still maintain a sense of their humanity. They struggle to survive with limited resources, while the Master thrives on abundance and manipulates others for personal gain. Even after Matla saves the Master's life, the Master continues to exploit him, creating a stark contrast between their characters. The Master punishes Matla and Jata for their intentions, while Matla consistently risks his own life to save the Master. Rather than seeking revenge or heeding the advice of others to abandon the Master, Matla acts virtuously. However, his virtuous actions are met with deceit, betrayal, and further mistreatment from the Master. The Master's desire to separate Matla from his daughter exemplifies his willingness to exploit anyone and anything for personal pleasure.

2.3 Aghor Ghosh: The Master

The actions of Aghor Ghosh, colloquially known as the Master, have deeply unsettled the entire village. Not only are the villagers burdened by overwhelming debt, but they also endure the Master's inhumane behavior, which includes compelling the community to surrender their financial resources. He even resorts to selling their possessions without their knowledge or consent, leaving the villagers feeling taken advantage of and crushed beneath his tyrannical rule. Moreover, in the play, the Master's wicked nature extends beyond his financial pursuits, targeting Matla's pregnant daughter, Badami. His unwelcome advances and despicable treatment of females within the community—Badami and Dakkha alike—reveal the depths of his depravity. His treacherous nature becomes evident as he fixates on Badami, disregarding her pregnancy and imminent childbirth, with the aim of acquiring her as his new concubine. He refers to her as a "flowered banana tree," symbolizing her ripe and desirable state.

An additional allegory employed by the playwright is that of the snake, which is equated with the persona of the Master (Aghor Ghosh). When Jata brings home a cobra snake he discovered in the jungle while foraging for sustenance, he harbors aspirations of nurturing and rearing it as an esteemed serpent. The grandfather (Jata) elucidates to his daughter, "Yes, this one's a first-class one. You don't often see one like this, Granddaughter. These days, a well-bred snake's as rare as a well-bred man. Where've they all disappeared now! Hear it hissing… it wants to kiss you, so it hisses!" (p. 120). This metaphor of the cobra snake aptly captures the essence of the Master's character. He, too, aspires to abduct Badami, abscond with her, and afflict her and her offspring with his rapacious intentions, resembling the bane of poison. Just as the cobra is revered as the sovereign of serpents and occupies the pinnacle in their hierarchy, the Master represents the preeminent figure vested with dominion over the entire village, encompassing their fiscal matters and livelihoods.

2.4 Unmasking the Honey Traps

The play also employs symbolism through the concept of a "honey trap," representing the deceptive tactics employed by both sides to achieve their desired objectives. The various snares devised by the characters in the theatrical production create a honeycomb framework that propels the narrative. The symbol of honey embodies seduction and allure, which prompt individuals to act in divergent manners, whether virtuous or illicit, in their pursuit of it. In addition, honey and poison serve as antithetical entities within the play. Honey is saccharine, while poison is acrimonious and fatal. Shankar, Aghor Ghosh's son, assumes a friendly and egalitarian persona to manipulate Badami and fulfill his goals. To deceive Badami further, he even requests water from her and sits on the floor of their household, feigning equality and advocating for impartial treatment. When she attempts to provide him with a mat to sit on, he avoids speaking directly to Badami, instead conveying his message through her aunt Dakkha, stating, "Aunt, tell her it's all right! We're businessmen. We don't discriminate between the high and the low" (p. 151). He further adds, "Aunt, ask her to get me some water…" (p. 151). Badami is taken aback by the situation, as a man of higher social standing and, importantly, the son of the Master, is requesting water from a woman of lower caste within their household. Following the caste doctrines, the reservations of the upper caste people in protecting the purity of the water from the touch of the untouchables is also a known fact.

In response, she exclaims, "Water? You! Drinking water in my house! Aunt..." (p. 151). Shankar, however, counters, "Why not? Will I be cast out if I drink water here? Aren't you also a human being?" (p. 151). To secure her cooperation, Shankar concocts a story detailing her husband's recent visit to his shop, expressing a desire to reconcile with her. In exchange for her assistance in saving his father, Shankar promises to provide the couple with a comfortable and worry-free life. He even manages to convince her, despite her advanced pregnancy, to undertake the duties of an Ojha to ensure the Master's survival, a responsibility her father and grandfather had refused to fulfill. Meanwhile, Dakkha devises her own strategy to liberate herself from Aghor Ghosh.'s control over her life. Although they are not biologically related, she considers him to be her brother. Nonetheless, the Master maintains an illicit relationship with her, a fact evident in her speech as she asserts, "No one knows even today that you're not my own brother… Since then, young though I was, you never let me feel the ache of not having a husband… O brother of mine…" (p. 146). Due to Shankar's frequent business travels, Dakkha assumes responsibility for all domestic affairs, including financial matters. Despite enduring mistreatment from the Master, she feigns sadness and concern for his deteriorating health. However, her true intention is to inherit any wealth he leaves behind upon his demise and gain access to the safe, thereby securing the entirety of the capital.Another trap depicted in the play is orchestrated by Phukna, who intentionally intoxicates Matla in order to hinder his capacity to perform Ojha rituals and consequently obstruct his efforts to save the life of the Master. Although Phukna acts as Matla's ally, his true intention is to prevent the Master's recovery due to the significant debt owed to him by the villagers. Matla's heavily inebriated state impairs his ability to execute the necessary procedures and rituals required to save the Master. He is rendered immobile and unable to think clearly, let alone properly carry out the chants and rituals.

Additionally, Jata devises a plan and proposes it to Matla: they will feign efforts to preserve the Master's life, while their underlying objective is to extort as much money as possible from Dakkha by pretending to need funds for the essential materials required for the Master's healing. Jata is indebted to the Master, knowing he cannot repay the debt, thus he seeks to prevent Matla from saving the Master's life. He explicitly instructs Matla, "I owe him taka - twenty times five. Don't you dare think of taking the poison out of him…" (p. 133). Jata's motivations are solely driven by monetary gain. Each individual involved in the situation harbors their own concealed motives for either saving or not saving the Master, with the exception of Matla.

Matla, influenced by Jata, aids him in his plan to simulate attempts to rescue the Master. Consequently, Matla becomes entangled in the various traps devised by other characters within the play. He is not afforded the choice of whether to utilize his Ojha practices to treat the patient; rather, he is obligated with the responsibility of salvaging the Master. Matla expresses his perplexity to Jata, stating, "I feel I've walked into a large burger of a trap myself! Neither can we chant nor can we let others go near him fearing he comes round! The man's dying but still he won't spare us!" (p. 154). In contrast to the others, Matla has no ulterior motives. He even endeavors to protect the Master from a centipede attempting to infiltrate his already poisoned body. Matla comprehends that permitting the centipede to infiltrate will exacerbate the Master's condition and ultimately result in his demise. Despite his uncertainty regarding whether to perform the Ojha rituals to save him, Matla refuses to passively allow any external force to further harm the Master and proactively shields him from any additional harm. Matla's unwavering determination to protect and save the Master, despite the numerous traps and deceptive intentions of others, demonstrates Matla's rectitude.

2.5 Badami's Resolve

Badami, the daughter of Matla, finds herself pregnant and abandoned by her financially destitute spouse. Bereft of support aside from her father and grandfather, who eke out a living through menial occupations to secure their basic necessities, Badami is left to fulfill the domestic demands and provide sustenance for the entire household while bearing the onus of her pregnancy. Consequently, she frequently endures hunger and agony due to prolonged periods devoid of nourishment. Frustrated with their plight, she implores Matla, "Have you brought anything? Could you get anything? No? Nothing? Three days and you've not been able to get a single grain! Let it die, the demon in my belly-let it die!" (p. 118).

These corporeal discomforts are further exacerbated by the presence of nascent life within Badami. She relies on her father and grandfather for sustenance, enduring disparagement and sporadic acts of physical abuse from them. Despite these travails, Badami remains resolute in traversing her pregnancy and surmounting this arduous phase. However, hunger pangs and the hormonal fluctuations associated with pregnancy at times lead her to exhibit anger and mimic her father's behavior, which only serves to stoke his fury. This culminates in him striking her and even resorting to threatening to terminate her unborn baby and coerce her into remarriage. Upon learning about the threats and incidents of infanticide, Badami experiences intense anger and uncontrollable bouts of crying. Therefore, it appears that the lower caste women's predicament is more terrible than that of the men. We can catch a glimpse of this tragic fate of these women in the roles of Badami and Dakkha. It is evident from this comment that while Dalit men suffer from casteism, Dalit women are bound to experience double oppression because of their caste identity and gender identity. They experience dual misery as a result of both patriarchal and Brahmanical values. It has been seen that the men and women of the higher castes, as well as the members of their own society and even their own families, have historically excluded and oppressed Dalit women. They are powerless due to societal prejudice, economic exploitation, and sexual oppression. Uma Chakravarti, in her book Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens (2018), wrote that Dalit feminists have verbalized the position of the three-way subjugation of Dalit women: "(i) as subjects to caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes; (ii) as laborers subject to class-based oppression, mainly at the hands of the upper and middle castes who form the majority of landowners; (iii) as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste" (p. 135). Both her grandfather, Jata, and her father, Matla, often attribute Badami's lamentable condition to her sharp tongue and demanding nature. Jata frequently reminds her of his wife, who tragically took her own life by drowning in the river when he couldn't provide her with food. Jata recounts this story to Badami, saying, "Your grandmother, who starved for seven consecutive days until she finally jumped into the river... She never uttered a single harsh word to me, even until the end. Matla, remember how she smiled that godly smile of a faithful wife and slipped into the river? And how the people on the banks stood and hailed her?" (p. 121). Surprisingly, despite her immense suffering, Jata's wife never uttered a word of reproach or blame towards him. Since Dalit women are not viewed as a distinct entity, their oppressions at the hands of the Dalit patriarchal system remains without any proper address, and in most cases, the torments of women are marked either as caste atrocity or gender atrocity.

Consequently, Badami is blamed for her own predicament. Her husband allegedly left her due to her verbose and sarcastic demeanor. Jata advises Matla to expel her from the house and says, "See how my great son-in-law has done his job and run off. Why would you bear this burden? You'll need at least twenty taka for her to give birth. Where will you find the money? Otherwise, just finish it off" (p. 121). Therefore, she finds herself suffering immensely within the confines of her father's household, at the hands of her own family members. However, she possesses admirable virtue and willpower, as she is the one who initially conceives the idea of saving the Master's life and initiates the discussion regarding humanity, ethics, and duty. She questions the morality of her father and grandfather in allowing a man to perish before their very eyes when they have the power to save him. When she confesses to Shankar the truth, she says, "To tell you the truth, we fear saving your pa... That one man alone has destroyed this entire village..." (p. 163). successfully persuading her father to save Aghor Ghosh's life despite facing strong opposition from Jata (her grandfather) and the other villagers. She provides her father with the necessary support to fulfill his duty. Her optimistic outlook on life and unwavering faith in humanity lead her to believe that if Matla saves the Master's life, he may potentially reward him with a significant sum of money or grant him land, thus improving their current miserable existence. Furthermore, she considers the future well-being of her unborn child, recognizing the need for financial resources during and after its birth. She says to Matla, "A new person's about to come into your house. Have you forgotten all about him? Won't you need taka for that? Listen to what I tell you. If you save Master, he'll give you all you want, all the money you want, Pa-…" (p. 134). Consequently, her motivation for urging her father to save the Master's life is tinged with her own underlying desire to secure funds for her unborn child. She reinforces her idea repeatedly, telling Matla, "Have you thought of the benefits that await you if you save the Master today? Suppose he grants you a piece of land... suppose he gives you money for the whole year or anything else your heart desires... suppose…" (p. 141).

2.5 Superstitions Surrounding Women

Superstitions concerning women are prominently featured in the play. One notable instance occurs when Jata inquires of Dakkha whether they consume shoal fish and turtles, to which Dakkha retorts, "Fool! Do you see any sindoor on my forehead?" (p. 135). The term "sindoor" alludes to the marital status of Hindu women, and Dakkha's lack of sindoor, coupled with her choice of a narrow, black-bordered saree, signals her widowhood. Consequently, Dakkha adheres to traditional Hindu customs, which prohibit widows from partaking in certain activities, including the consumption of non-vegetarian food. Additionally, it is believed that widows ought to be absent during Ojha's rites aimed at expelling poison from a body, lest the presence of a woman hinder the removal of the poison. Another instance presented in the play is when Jata reminds Badami that women, particularly expectant mothers, should steer clear of cremation grounds, gardens, spirits, and snakes. Later on, Shankar deceives Badami into performing Ojha's rituals, prompting her to start chanting. However, her father interjects and cautions her against engaging in such rites while pregnant, as it is believed that the poison will pass on to the unborn child, causing them to bear a resemblance to the person from whom the poison was extracted. Moreover, he references the belief that the goddess Mansha grows indignant upon coming into contact with contaminated hands, including those of women. Nevertheless, Badami, despite the influence of these superstitions, emerges as a resolute character who defies societal pressure. She safeguards the lives of all the villagers, including her own and her father's, from the vengeful Aghor Ghosh. Towards the end of the play, Badami arrives at the difficult decision to kill Aghor Ghosh, recognizing that he unwarrantedly merits no mercy. She acknowledges her error in opposing the desires of the villagers and Jata, acting selfishly to secure a brighter future for her unborn child. In her endeavor, Badami procures an earthen vessel concealing a venomous snake disguised as honey, which she offers to Aghor Ghosh. But this tactic ultimately fails, as Matla had slain the snake beforehand to protect Badami. Consequently, Badami takes matters into her own hands and dispatches Aghor Ghosh with a tortoise-slaughtering machete.

IV. CONCLUSION

The play underscores the importance of preserving life as the ultimate act, transcending societal divisions such as class, caste, religion, and gender, as well as moral judgments. This theme parallels the struggle for survival against death, mirroring Matla's fight against the cruelty of Aghor Ghosh. One character embodies compassion and generosity, while the other represents unscrupulousness and exploitation, emphasizing the clash between ethics and deceit. Despite being born into impoverished circumstances, Matla exemplifies humanity and moral rectitude. In contrast, Aghor Ghosh fails to exhibit the compassion and moral uprightness that Matla possesses despite his own destitution. This characterization of Matla challenges the

assumption that morality and humanity are exclusive to the affluent. Matla's actions are not driven by personal gain or a strategic calculation of rewards. Ultimately, humanity triumphs despite facing numerous challenges and opposition from individuals like Jata, Phukna, and the villagers. Ultimately, it becomes evident that Matla, the Ojha, surpasses Aghor Ghosh, the moneylender, in terms of kindness and greatness.

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