

The House of Illusions **A Study in Genet's *The Balcony***

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Abstract

The definition of "prostitute" and prostitution is a difficult one and a question over which the legislators of many lands and nations differed. A notable feature of prostitution is its epidemic increase at times of war, revolution and armed commotion, on account of economic, social and psychological factors generated by such conditions of mortal conflicts. Wars invariably deprive young wives and lovers of their men folk, resulting in financial, sexual and emotional frustrations. At no time is the natural balance between the sexes more seriously disturbed than during wars, when thousands of men are thrown into one sector of the country and hundreds of towns and villages are left to women and children only. Loaded with booty provisions and fat salary, the warrior finds in the starving and displaced woman an easy target. To the enemy, she is just another victim of war. The permanent threat of death and the cheapened price of life diminish the sanctity of human values and at the same time engender a burning desire to ensure the survival of human life by a crude response to the sex instinct.

Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, throws light on the world of whoredom where Madame Irma and her service carries out her clients' outrageous fantasies in her "House of Illusions".

Finally, the study attempts to diagnose the basic reasons that push women for harlotry.

The House of Illusion : A Study in Jean Genets' The Balcony:

The apparition of the prostitute haunted writers from the beginning of the nineteenth century- a development which called for the attention of the critic, the sociologist and the historian. There were far more tragic aspects of society than the matter of selling and buying sex but, for whatever reason, people continued to treat the fall of woman as something worse than death. Death, indeed, was accepted as God's work, for which people might disclaim responsibility, but prostitution was looked upon as the work of man. The whore as the quintessence of the existing society was a general conception common among thinkers of all shades of opinion. W. Leck, who represented

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the Christian version of social history , described the prostitute as " the perpetual symbol of the degradation and sinfulness of man" .(Leck, P.68).

Genet was the outcome of the rapid industrialisation of Europe; his mother was a prostitute and his dad was unknown. Since childhood, the only life Genet knew was the street. Eventually, he spent time in several penitentiaries for Castro boys. During this time, he immersed himself in the widespread homosexual community active in the newly reformed prisons. Genet set his success from within the prison. In prison, serving a life sentence, he attempted to write a novel, only for it to be destroyed. He, then, rewrote the whole novel, from scratch, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Sartre and Cocteau lobbied for his release. Later, he set up his stage success with his theatrical masterpieces. His pieces such as *The Maids*, *The Balcony*, and *The Screens* made him a famous playwright in the Theatre of the Absurd. His service in the French Foreign Legion brought about his first homosexual relationship within a context of love. He courted and fell in love with a young hair stylist in Syria . The rare acceptance of such liberal views accepted by the local townspeople, made him feel comfortable and happy.⁽¹⁾

His play functions as his outlet against the bourgeois class that participated in homosexuality but never admitted it. His anger for such people are great since they were the ones who solicited him as a male prostitute. They always would accept him for his homosexuality but when society rejected Genet for such, they immediately disappeared from his back. In general, all of Genet's plays are criticism of the French bourgeois.⁽²⁾

Moreover, at a time when middle-class gay authors were promoting the metaphor of homosexuality as illness and mounting pleas for sympathy and compassion, Genet embraced the only other two alternatives- homosexuality as a crime or sin, a far stronger position designed to frighten his reader. His position and works are unique because he was not influenced as much by the war as other absurd dramatists, but instead, he was influenced by the new liberal ideas .He was associated amongst people known for their sexual experimentation⁽³⁾ The early to mid-twentieth century heavily influenced the artists of the Theatre of the Absurd. Through the wars, epidemics, and liberalisation of values, such artist were able to effectively create works representing the new sentiment of the modern world, confusion.(Pronko, P.34).

The Balcony was his first commercially successful play. Like many of Genet's works, the play was inspired by Genet's contempt for society and obsession with topics such as sex, prostitution, politics, and revolution. Set inside a brothel where common men play men of power in their sexual fantasies, *The Balcony* reflects the emptiness of societal roles. Reality and illusion feed off each other in the difficult play. Dreams may make reality

tolerable, but when they come true, as when the customers are forced to live the roles they play, it is not as satisfying.(Mc.Mahon, P.35).

The Balcony opens in a brothel, The Grand Balcony, that caters to the fantasies of its male clientele. Inside, prostitutes assist patrons in play acting a variety of roles : a judge inflicting a punishment on a beautiful thief, a bishop dealing with a penitent sinner, a general meditating on his relationship with his horse (played by a bridled prostitute).⁽⁴⁾ However, fantasy and reality become clouded when the insurgents in the street overthrow the Royal Palace and presumably kill the country's queen and her court. It is then that the Chief of Police replaces these dignitaries with their simulacra from The Grand Balcony, including the bordello's Madame Irma assuming the role of Queen. As the masquerades warm to their roles, they convince even the revolutionaries that the illusion created in the bordello is preferable to reality.⁽⁵⁾

Irma, the owner of the whorehouse, is arguing with a customer over a fee. He was dressed as a bishop, and is only interested in the revolution that is going on outside and the truthfulness of the sins the woman who served him has confessed to. Irma tries to hurry him, but he will not be rushed. He enjoys his role and continues to play it. He does not leave despite the fact that his safety is at risk outside.

Irma (bluntly) : An agreement 's an agreement, When a deal's been made....

(*Throughout the scene she hardly moves. She is standing very near the door.*)

The Bishop (*Very gently , waving her aside with a gesture*) : And when the die is cast

Irma: No. Twenty. Twenty and no nonsense. Or I'll lose my temper. And that's not like me....Now, if you have any difficulties....

The Bishop (*Curtly, and tossing away the mitre*): Thank you.

The Balcony

(Scene One , P.8)

Bishops, also, acted like brothel-keepers throughout the history. Kings, bishops and emperors built their own brothels to bring in more income. The brothels of Southwark, for example, were controlled by the Bishop of Winchester and displayed such names on their signboards as "The Cardinal Hat". (Kishtainy,P.25)Some royal brothels were opened and provided with medical supervision; others were attached to the universities; platoons of whores marched with the armies. (Leck,P.32) Many parish councils in England sold destitute women to professional pimps to avoid maintaining them at the expense pf the rateprayers.The parish of Swadlincote ordered the sale of a woman for a florin after her husband had run off.(Kishtainy,Ibid.)

There was nothing exceptionally cruel about this, for many poor men were known to have sold their wives to brothel-keepers. At that time, women

had only one of three careers open to them outside domestic slavery : nunnery, sorcery or harlotry. In the Middle Ages, some townspeople pressed the authorities to build special ghettos for town's harlots. Many town councils responded positively, and the remnants of these brothel quarters may still be seen in many towns and cities. In Russia , prostitutes were forced to carry the yellow cards mentioned by Dostoevsky, and to live in special barracks from which they were not allowed to leave. Only when seriously ill were they permitted , in Warsaw for example, to get out after a certificate signed by two doctors had been submitted . In Minsk, the regulations allowed them to leave only "in case of death".(Kishtainy, Ibid.)

The philosopher Lucien Goldmann suggests that the themes of *The Balcony* may be divided among those that are essential and primary and those that are non-essential and secondary. Those that we may recognize from Genet's earlier work-the double,the mirror,sexuality,dream-death vs. reality-impure life- belong to the secondary level , he argues, while the play's essential theme is a clear and comprehensible analysis of the transformation of industrial society into a technocracy. Genet relates the experience of his characters "to the great political and social upheavals of the twentieth century"(Goldmann,63), Goldmann argues, particularly important among which is "the collapse of the tremendous hopes for revolution".(Ibid.) He discerns in the play's dramatic structure a balance of three equal movements-"established order, threat to order, and order again re-established" .(Ibid.) The first section of the play dramatises the way in which the prestigious images of the established order-the Bishop, the Judge,the General- belie the actual bearers of power in modern society:

Iram and the Chief of police "possess the real power," (Goldmann,P.70) Goldmann point out ; they " represent the two essential aspects of technocracy : the organization of an enterprise and the power of the State". (Ibid.) Consequently , the Chief of Police's dilemma dramatizes the historical process of " the growth in prestige of the technicians of repression in the consciousness of the great masses of people".(Ibid.)

The relationship of the Chief of Police and Irma is an interesting one particularly because, theoretically, the Chief of Police would be seeking to root out prostitution and close business⁽⁶⁾:

The Chief of Police (*Forcefully*) : My image is growing bigger and bigger. It's becoming colossal .Everything around me repeats and reflects it. And you've never seen it represented in this place?

Irma : In any case, even if it were celebrated here, I wouldn't see anything. The ceremonies are secret.

The Chief of Police: You liar. You've got secret peep-holes in every wall. Every partition, every mirror, is rigged. In one place, you can hear the sighs, in another the echo of the moans. You don't need me to tell you that brothel tricks are mainly

mirror tricks.... (*Very sadly*) Nobody yet! But I'll make my image detach itself from me. I'll make it penetrate into your studios, force its way in, reflect and multiply itself. Irma, my function weighs me down. Here, it will appear to me in the blazing light of pleasure and death. (*Musingly*) Of death.

Irma: You must keep killing , my dear George.

The Chief of Police : I do what I can, I assure you. People fear me more and more.

The Balcony
(Scene Five, P.48)

The revolution outside is reaching a critical point, and it is too dangerous for anyone to go outside. The Chief of Police interrogates Irma and Carmen (another whore) about the fantasies of the men who come to the brothel, and he wants to know if he appears in any of the fantasies. As a bad guy, a whipping boy, whatever... The thing is : once one have a role in society that is iconic enough to be "used" in fantasies at the brothel, one know that he has arrived. The Chief of Police, a vain man, wants to know if he has reached that stature yet. (Hayman, P.90)

While Goldmann detects an "extremely strong" Brechtian influence in *The Balcony* , Carol Rosen characterises Genet's dramaturgy as "Artaudian". Just as Mme. Irma's brothel is "the intangible shadow of real social phenomenon", she suggests , "her closet dramas are the Artaudian double of their impotent bases in truth". (Oswald, P.54) Rosen reads Irma's brothel as "a metaphysical construct in a discussion play about the value of mimetic ritual, the transcendence possible in play, and the magical efficacy of the theater itself"; it is "more than a altruistically ordered stage brothel; it is more than real; it expresses conflicting ideas with erotic nuances of a dream". (Ibid.) In line with Genet's interest in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* 1872, Rosen aligns the development of Irma's relationship to the audience with the mythic narrative of Dionysos toying with Pentheus in Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae* 405 BCE. In contrast to Goldmann's analysis of the play as an epic defamiliarisation of the historical rise of technocracy, Rosen sees *The Balcony* as a theater of cruelty staging of "mythic dimension to the dark side of human soul". (Ibid.)

Scene Two takes us to another client and another room in the multi ,studio-like brothel. Inside a room in the brothel, a client plays out a fantasy as a Judge. His whore plays a thief who is about to be executed by the executioner, played by a male employee of the establishment named Arthur. The Judge also relishes his role-play. Every outside noise, however, upsets him. He worries about the revolution, sharing the latest information with the other two. When he returns to his role, he can enjoy it too much, scaring the woman. Mostly, the Judge is the one who is humiliated by the other two for his pleasure. (Thody, P.76)

The Judge: Call me my Lord. How long have you been here?

The Executioner : Since the day before yesterday , my Lord .

The Judge (*Reassuming the theatrical tone and reassuming the reading*): Let her speak. I like that puling voice of hers, that voice without resonance....Look here: You've got to be a model thief if I'm to be a model judge. If you're a fake thief, I become a fake judge. Is that clear?

The Thief: Oh yes, my Lord.

The Judge (*He continues reading*) : Good. Thus far everything has gone off well.My executioner has hit hard... for he too has his function. We are bound together , you, he and I. For example, if he didn't hit, how could I stop him from hitting? Therefore, he must strike so that I can intervene and demonstrate my authority. And you must deny your guilt so that he can beat you.

The Balcony
(Scene Two, P.15)

The brothel becomes a therapeutic asylum , staffed by human dolls in which men can stick the pins and needles of their anger and frustration and allay the inhuman estrangement of their souls (Kishtainy,P.109). This can be typically depicted in scene three when one can see a General walking around on the satge.One don't know if he is really a general, or if he is just acting out one of his sexual fantasies.

The General : Are you a horse or an illiterate? If you're a horse, you toss your head.Help me. Pull.Don't pull so hard. See here, You're not a plough-horse.

The Girl: I do what I have to do.

The General: Are you rebelling? Wait till I'm ready. When I put the bit into your mouth....

The Girl: Oh no, not that.

The General: A general reprimanded by his horse! You'll have the bit, the birdle,the harness, the saddlegirth,and I, in boots and helmet, will whip and plunge!

The Balcony
(Scene 3,P.24)

During the nineteenth century , the child prostitute furnished the ideal therapeutic doll, and the infant schools ,as they used to call these expensive vice houses in industrialised England, provided ideal whoring fantasies to the leaders of trade and industry and made its contribution to the building of the British Empire. Procurers had even to tap continental sources to satisfy the rising demand for virgins in London. "Our business is in maidenheads, not in maids" said one. "My friends take the girls to be seduced and that is an end to it as far as we are concerned". (Henriques, P.328) This is only one of the least sinister aspects of the sadistic masochistic sex orgies which were common practices in Europe's brothel-lands.(Ibid.)

As poignantly remarked in Jean Genet's play, to enter a brothel meant the rejection of the real world, and the unconscious realisation of this fact disturbed the mental peace of the participations-the masters and makers of existing social reality. The moral and financial "hangover" which followed the orgies and sexual debasement actuated the mechanism of guilt, a process which characterised the bulk of nineteenth century literature dealing with the prostitute. It is not a coincidence in the least to find a harlot lurking in nearly all the major works of that great master of the guilt neurosis novel, Dostoevsky. Zola's approach to prostitutes also reflects his own painful family life (Kishtainy, Ibid.). Tolstoy started his adolescent years with the violation of a helpless maid in his house, an event which must have kept preying on his conscience until he finally resolved it by redeeming that girl, not in reality but in the dream world of a novel. (Dollimore, P.91)

The novelist Alexander Kuprin was one of the many writers who preferred to view this problem in psychological terms, yet his grasp of psychology was partial, and he produced unconvincing characters and implausible situations. For him, prostitutes were in two categories: "They are either hysterical liars, deceivers, dissemblers, with a coolly perverted mind and sinuous dark soul, or else undoubtedly self-denying, blindly devoted, foolish, naive animals". In one word, as he sees them, they are psychopaths. Poor Pasha was so popular because every time she had a man, her screams and groans of ecstasy were heard throughout the house until she was carried out, after a score of men, in a delirious coma. However, practically all Kuprin's whores came from the second category; after all "the value of the human soul maybe known by the depth of its fall and the height of its flight". (Hamilton, P.123)

William Acton, the physiologist who made a careful study of prostitution in England found that 50 per cent of all diseases hitting the public came from prostitutes, but the naval and military services were much the most exposed targets. Acton was certainly the outstanding spokesman for the bourgeois position *vis-a-vis* the "master problem". In his book *Prostitution*, he reiterated the claim that some women were born harlots. Vanity, he found, was the main cause of prostitution, and idleness and vanity were inevitable bequests from parent to child. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, supported this, by following his nature theories and claimed that some women were naturally made for prostitution. Indeed, the Russians called prostitution "the necessary social evil". (Acton, P.115)

Genet was apparently obsessed with the play, which he wrote and re-wrote in many versions, finally introducing into the last scene the event of a revolution which sweeps away this little world of illusions by introducing the outside realities of injustice, poverty and exploitation of society on the one hand and the new set of revolutionary delusions on the other. Chantal, one of

the girls of this establishment , runs away and joins the social convulsion under the slogan " The revolution begins by denouncing the make-believe", which may explain the description of the Balcony by Harold Hobson, the *Sunday Times* critic, as a trial of reality by fantasy. ⁽⁷⁾

Irma: Yes. About Chantal, tell me, what do you know about her?

Carmen: I've questioned all the girls: Rosine, Elyane, Florence, Marlyse. They've each prepared a little report. I'll let you have them. But I didn't get much out of them. It's possible to spy beforehand .During the fighting, it's harder. For one thing, the camps are more sharply defined. You can choose. When there's peace, it's too vague. You don't quite know whom you're betraying. Nor even whether you're betraying. There's no news about Chantal. They don't even know whether she's still alive.

Irma: But, tell me, you wouldn't have any scruples about it?

Carmen: None at all. Entering a brothel means rejecting the world. Here I am and here I say. Your mirrors and orders and the passions are my reality.

The Balcony
(Scene Five, P.41)

Genet's *The Balcony* reveals the hidden social sub- context .One that clearly underlines the brothel as a product of a society that creates it but doesn't take any social responsibility for its construction. These ideas are placed in the context of the play to reveal how the dominant state ideology is implemented through power heads such as the Bishop, the Judge, and the General. It studies the way in which the state glosses over the needs of groups that have been ostracised to ensure the smooth functioning of society. (Craig,P.40)

Conclusion:

Genet emphasises the social function of theatre and looks at it as a medium that has the potential of bringing about change. Prostitution as diagnosed through the brothel (House of Illusions) in *The Balcony* is a problem that might through its shadows on the different aspects of life. Unlike the emergent states of the Third World which acted as if the question of prostitution had been solved by the mere fact of gaining independence and did no more than order the police to clear the prostitutes off the streets, close their houses and ban any literature on the subject, the socialist countries made a conscious effort to rehabilitate these women and find them suitable work. Success in this can't be described as complete. It is a problem which has many causes and facets, and unemployment and poverty- important as they are- can't be treated as the whole question. In many East European capitals there is now a tacit acceptance and semi-official organizations of prostitution indicated by police control and regular compulsory medical check-ups. This kind of reluctant arrangement will remain inadequate in the absence of a

courageous admission which can then have its true expression in the arts and literature of the country. It was with some struggle that writers were able to tackle this question, and it will be a considerable loss for us to deny them now the right to treat this theme which has enriched literature, conscience and social progress of the whole human race. As such , the harlot is not only an eternal shadow but also an indispensable device for authorship and creative work.

Notes:

1- Jean Genet, www.wikipedia.com.

2-Ibid.

3-Bernard Frechtman. *The Thief's Journal* .1965. Trans. Of *Journal Du Voleur*.1949.

4-Leila Shahid. *Jean Genet and the Position of Sudden Departure*.Autodafe 2 (2001).IIFeb2002. www.autodaf.org/autodaf/autodafe

5-Kristin Ross. *The Balcony*. www.bookrags.com.

6-Maria Shevtsova. "The Consumption of Empty Signs: Jean Genets's *The Balcony*".*Modern Drama* 30.1(1987):35-45.

7-*The Times*,16 October 1858.

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بيت الأوهام دراسة في مسرحية جينيت الشرفة

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المستخلص

يعد تعريف " البغاء " و " المومس " مسألة صعبة اختلف فيها المشرعون في مختلف الأمم والبلدان. من ابرز صفات البغاء انتشاره الوبائي السريع في أوقات الحروب ، الثورات ، والنزاعات المسلحة، على حساب العوامل الاقتصادية ، الاجتماعية ، والنفسية التي تنشأ عن النزاع المستديم. تحرم الحروب الزوجات الشابات والمحبين من شركائهم، مما يؤدي إلى احباطات مادية، جنسية، وعاطفية على حد سواء. ومامن وقت يختل فيه التوازن الطبيعي بين الأجناس بصورة حقيقية أكثر من أوقات الحروب، حينما يتم عزل الآلاف من الرجال في جزء من البلاد تاركين المئات من المدن والقرى للنساء والأطفال فقط. بالنسبة للمحارب المثقل بالغنائم والأجر العالي ، فان المرأة المتشردة ، المتصورة جوعا ماهي إلا هدف سهل. فبالنسبة للعدو المرأة هي ضحية أخرى من ضحايا الحرب. إن تهديد الموت القائم واسترخاى حياة البشر ينتهك حرمة القيم الإنسانية ويولد رغبة متعطشة للحفاظ على الجنس البشري من خلال الاستجابة لنداء الرغبة الجنسية في الوقت ذاته. تلقى مسرحية جان جينيت (الشرفة) بالضوء على عالم البغاء حيث تعمل مدام ايرما وحاشيتها على تحقيق الأوهام الفاحشة لزيانها في (بيت الأوهام) خاصتها. وأخيرا تحاول الدراسة تشخيص الأسباب الرئيسية التي تدفع بالنساء نحو البغاء.