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Subversion through Inversion: A Reading of Genet's *The Balcony*

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Abstract

The Balcony by Jean Genet is a play that explores themes like illusion versus reality, role-playing and the nature of theatricality itself. Based in a “House of Illusions” (brothel), the vantage point that Genet offers to his readers is clearly upside-down. In other words, one approaches the acceptable/normative through the structural framework of the taboo.

Examining the tropes of mirrors and reflection, this paper attempts to examine the inverted world that this “House of Illusions” represents. Role-playing by the characters and the inversion of social roles are themes that heighten this inversion.

*Furthermore, the paper seeks to explore the alternative universe created by Genet in *The Balcony*. Approaching the social spectrum through the brothel, one sees a strange comfort zone that the characters inhabit. This universe provides a scope for not only sustenance, but also*

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excitement. Unlike the hollow, meaningless visions created by other contemporary playwrights, Genet creates a colourful and richly textured universe. This paper is an attempt at a detailed examination of the subversive potential of the play, projected through an inversion of the conventional world order.

Keywords -Absurd, Illusory, House of Illusions, normative, metatheatrical, textured, reflection, role-playing.

The Balcony(*Le Balcon*) was the third play written by Jean Genet, and occupies a significant position within his oeuvre. First published in 1956 and performed in 1957ⁱ, *The Balcony* is a powerful piece of writing that has the capacity to hold the audience spellbound with its use of bold language as well as metaphors. Since its first performances, the ingenious structural framework of illusions that Genet has created, holds theatricality within as much as without. For instance, the words of Bettina Knapp on her experience at one of the performances of *The Balcony* are a case in point:

The action in *The Balcony* seemed so extraordinary that when I went to see this play and the theatre caught fire, no one budged from their seats, so transfixed were they by what was going on in the play. They thought the smoke and the flames part of the action. It was only moments later when the actors suddenly stopped and a man announced the fire, that the people began filing out of the theatre slowly – still not certain as to what was real and what was feigned.

(Knapp, 164)ⁱⁱ

The extensive use of illusions within the play is such that the reader/audience begins to forget the difference between illusion and reality beyond a point. Especially in the case of illusions within

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the role-playing within the play, the confusion slowly gives way to delight, as one grasps the finer detail.

Inversion in *The Balcony*: Levels and/or Layers

Set in a city amidst revolutionary uprising, the entire play is located within the physical realm of Madame Irma's "House of Illusions" (the traditional French name for a brothel), where clients become "characters" and the desire for sexual gratification becomes an ancillary prop in the ultimate fulfilment of the desire for power. Mirrors fulfil the twin purpose of being the apparatus as well as props in this elaborate setup, providing for the gratification that can be fulfilled only through witnessing oneself in the act. However, what one witnesses of one's self in these mirrors is not a mere reflection of the original. These mirrors perform a much larger role; they project the aura of the latent desire of the self. Furthermore, the gratification is heightened with the use of multiple mirrors, which project infinite images. In the words of Rima Drell Reck,

Genet's revaluation of the world is expressed by a series of inversions. The inversion of names and of values seems to signal that everything is its opposite and also itself. Palaces are prisons, prisons palaces. (Reck, 20)

Hence the theme of inversion actually forms the first layer of a much larger universe that Genet creates in *The Balcony*.

At the literal level, all characters seem inverted in the mirrors of Madame Irma's brothel. This is only a precursor to the metaphorical inversion of social order, for what these characters seek can only be granted to them as part of an illusion. However, this disenchantment with the

real and the fascination with the theatrical self are not the only purposes of their visits to the “House of Illusions”. Every character seeks some or the other modification within this primary level of inversion: while some seem to derive their desired gratification through a grander image of the characters whose political or social roles they fancy (the use of apparatuses like the twenty-inch cothurni and the cope renders the image of the make-believe bishop rather larger than life), others indulge in a lesser image of the self through masochistic inflictions. For instance, the make-believe judge seems readily prepared to lick the feet of the woman posing as the thief, in order for her to confess to her sins. In fact, the brothel has a studio specifically for the impersonations “of the beggars, of the tramps, where filth and poverty are magnified” (*The Balcony*, 37).

At another micro level, the medium itself becomes inverted. Language, which is a common area of concern in all twentieth century narratives alike, does not escape unchallenged in *The Balcony*. At a primary level, Genet replaces the language of acceptable speech by that of taboo. The erotic and the profane take the place of the normative and the sacred:

THE BISHOP (*to the mirror*): The majesty, the dignity, that light up my person, do not emanate from the attributions of my function. -No more, good heavens! than from my personal merits. -The majesty, the dignity that light me up come from a more mysterious brilliance: the fact that the bishop precedes me. Do I make myself clear, mirror, gilded image, ornate as a box of Mexican cigars? And I wish to be bishop in solitude, for appearance alone.... And in order to destroy all function, I want to cause a scandal and feel you up, you slut, you bitch, you trollop, you tramp . . .

(*The Balcony*, 12)

Clearly, the profanity of the “Bishop’s” language in this instance is not divorced from the social role of his personality. In fact, the social role enhances the excitement of commonplace linguistic

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profanity. Not only that, language also becomes an accomplice in inverting the real, by enhancing the nature of illusions. Every character who visits Madame Irma's house of illusions insists on a certain register and tone, as this in itself creates the persona that one seeks to emulate.

Placing the brothel in the foreground as our entry point into the larger social framework, Genet has blatantly inverted conventional perspective at the initial stage. So the reader enters the normative or the accepted through the peripheral or the rejected, not vice versa. This inversion of perspective becomes only more heightened as the play progresses. The revolution that one hears frequent mention of, throughout the play, is reported to have finally taken over the city by the end of the seventh scene. This leads to an inversion of the general social order, as it were. However, this inversion of social order is not merely what one expects as the consequence of any revolution, that is, the replacement of the figures of authority by those that were rebelling against them. This inversion takes even the reader by surprise; the replacements are actually the play actors whose fantasies suddenly seem to have transformed into reality itself. In other words, while the initial scenes of the play are about the aura surrounding a figure of authority becoming a replacement for the social function of the same, the later scenes exhibit a world where the make-believe has indeed replaced the "real".

This replacement of reality by illusion is further questioned through these new "participants" of the changing social order when they suddenly find themselves in the respective roles that they fantasized about earlier:

THE JUDGE (*with a sigh of relief*): What we've been through!

THE GENERAL: And it's not over! We have to invent an entire life... That's hard...

(*The Balcony*, 71)

Furthermore, these new “figures of authority” are shown to be in constant self-doubt and disenchantment with the new “reality” that confronts them. Funnily enough, the photographers who are supposed to publicize these new figures of authority to the real world, are shown to be the new creators of this power. Their job is not only limited to capturing the perfect image at the right time; it extends into the pragmatics of the creation of this perfect image:

SECOND PHOTOGRAPHER (to the Judge) : Would you mind pulling a longer face? You don't quite look like a judge. A little longer.

THE JUDGE : Horselike? Sullen?

SECOND PHOTOGRAPHER : Horselike and sullen, my Lord. And both hands in front, on your brief. What I want is a shot of *the* Judge. A good photographer is one who gives a definitive image. Perfect.

(*The Balcony*, 73)

In a way, Genet exercises a constant inversion in the play, wherein each inverted order of hierarchical power must further be questioned, ruptured and thereby, inverted.

The Illusory Universe of *The Balcony*: An Examination

The placement of Jean Genet's plays within the broader framework of the Theatre of the Absurdⁱⁱⁱ can be questioned as much as justified. For instance, one can clearly read into the fragmented universe projected in Genet's plays, complete with the lack of coherence and organic unity. The fragmentation of the world as a unified whole does enter Genet's works too. However, an examination of the illusory universe that Genet creates, especially in *The Balcony*, would

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expose the difference of his method from contemporary playwrights as much as his difficult placement within the category of Absurd playwrights^{iv}. This part of the paper is an attempt at a detailed examination of the illusory universe created in Genet's *The Balcony*.

While other contemporary playwrights expose the ruptures inherent in the fabric of the real world, Genet goes one step ahead and creates the image of an alternative universe which may exist on the periphery of the normative. Although other playwrights like Ionesco have examined the potential for such spaces in their works, the creation of such a space provides for a concrete alternative. Furthermore, Genet's alternative universe is not a space of emptiness. It is, in fact, an intricately detailed space that undermines the monolithic possibilities of the real world. Instead of pinning the socio political authoritative responsibility on one individual, Genet tries to create a structure with multiple positions and voices. In other words, while other playwrights might privilege the voice of an individual who doesn't seem to fit, Genet explores an entire universe that privileges polyphony.

In fact language itself, as examined by almost all Absurd playwrights in their respective works, provides the scope for an extant examination of the hollowness of the human condition. Samuel Beckett uses repetition as well as nonsense in plays like *Waiting for Godot* to elucidate this point. Similarly, Ionesco skilfully juxtaposes exactly identical dialogues in completely contrasting conversations in *Rhinoceros* to exhibit the fluidity of language. Genet, however, employs language in a unique manner quite unlike other contemporary playwrights. As voiced by Angela Belli, "[t]he language he creates is a poetic one, frequently incantatory and captivating in its contrast to the vacuity of modern speech" (Belli, 37). As mentioned before, Genet's

universe privileges polyphony as opposed to a single dominant voice, or no voice at all. In *The Balcony* for instance, whether role-playing or otherwise, the nuances of language are adequately employed in the form of variations between the sacred and the profane, tones of order and supplication and so on. These variations also give the reader/audience a lot more psychological insight into Genet's characters.

As has been pointed out before, the vantage point for the readers of *The Balcony* is very deliberately, a brothel, which falls on the margins of accepted social order. So the primary feature of the universe that Genet creates in this case is clearly that it presents an alternative to the real. However, inhabiting a rejected social space is not the only alternative that the characters are provided with. This space is specially designed to create the illusions of alternatives. For instance, by playing out the fantasies of people that ordinarily inhabit the fringes of society, the house of illusions permits them to afford the centrestage, aided by characters and props. So this illusory universe could then, very well be conceived of, as an alternative universe.

Secondly, this alternative universe can be so viewed, primarily because of the multiple levels of order that comprise it as well as rich colours that garnish it. In other words, this alternative space is not a lonely wasteland, but a grandly textured universe that never seems to disappoint. In this sense, the "house of illusions" presents an alternative to the real world, because it can be customized and moulded, and thus help the individual escape the fatalistic disenchantment of the latter.

Further, this universe always allows for the excitement of being able to see oneself in the form that one desires. Additionally, the props and apparatuses that enable this wish-fulfilment also make it easy for the characters to transform completely. For instance, while the play-actors

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transform into the actual figure-heads in the real world, Madame Irma easily dons on her jewels to take the shape of the new Queen. The characters are well aware of the flimsiness of their costumes:

THE QUEEN (*very angrily*): Veritable! And what about those? You mean that those you're wrapped and swathed in -- my whole paraphernalia! -- which come from my closets, aren't veritable?

THE BISHOP (*pointing to the Judge's ermine, the silk of his robe, etc.*): Rabbit, sateen, machine-made lace ... you think we're going to be satisfied with make-believe to the end of our days?

...

THE BISHOP: That day I had to dance. As for the rabbit, it's what it must be-the sacred image of ermine-it has the same power. (*The Balcony*, 77, 79)

So even though one can question the quality of this likeness, the image of this illusion is shown as adequate, even if barely so. This adequacy seems to stem from the distance that these figure-heads can and must maintain, from the general populace, at all times. In other words, the aura of authority is shown to be potent enough to replace the actual function of it.

Apart from allowing for the scope of seeing oneself in the form that one wishes to, the Grand Balcony functions primarily due to the possibility of allowing individuals to see their respective reflections. It is worth noting, however, that it is this exciting reflective aspect that allots Genet's theatrical universe its distinct flavour. In Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, one witnesses the

important role of a mirror in Berenger's moment of crisis. He repeatedly checks himself in the mirror to see if he is in the act of transformation, just like his other colleagues and friends. This constant affirmation of one's unchanging identity is completely different from Genet's characters, who revel in the fluidity of their identities. For them, the mirror becomes the site of affirming this very transformation, making the process all the more pleasurable. The fear of Berenger is actually the fantasy/desire of every character in *The Balcony*.

Looking deeper into the placement of the individual within this alternative universe, Genet's individual seems to be much more at ease in comparison to those created by other contemporary playwrights. To take the example of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* once again, whilst Berenger finds himself alone in a universe that's rapidly transforming, the characters in *The Balcony* seem to find solace and support in one another's company.

Similarly, instead of shouldering the individual responsibility, rather burden of one's existence, each character in *The Balcony* does his/her best to glorify the image that gradually transforms into the real. And so, instead of Ionesco's Berenger that does not seem to fit in the universe that surrounds him, we encounter characters that use illusions to their advantage and transform the very face of their reality. However, this is not to say that Genet projects an optimistic picture of the time and space that he depicts. The difference may very well stem from the fact that the vantage point of the fringes has the advantage of not wanting to fit. Unlike the portions that stick out from the dominant culture, the subculture of the brothel seems to be aware of its position vis-à-vis the normative. Moreover, it seems to be comfortable with its relative, even oppositional location in comparison to the accepted spaces in society. The inversion of normative/conventional social values then becomes an expected derivative function of such a space.

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Thus these individual characters who inhabit this space identify with it and even seem to feel a sense of belongingness in it. In fact, this belongingness becomes problematic when they're required to step out and replace individuals in the real world. They nostalgically recount the beauty of the illusive while expressing their discontentment with the real:

THE BISHOP : Then we shall go back to our rooms and there continue the quest of an absolute dignity. We ought never to have left them. For we were content there, and it was you who came and dragged us away. For ours was a happy state. And absolutely safe. In peace, in comfort, behind shutters, behind padded curtains, protected by a police force that protects brothels, we were able to be a general, judge and bishop to the point of perfection and to the point of rapture! You tore us brutally from that delicious, untroubled state.

(*The Balcony*, 79-80)

This becomes another affirmation of the fact that the alternative space, for Genet, is the more fulfilling, even if it never gets accepted into the mainstream. In fact, the very fact of its continual and consistent rejection (by the dominant culture) makes it all the more seductive and appealing.

In this alternative universe, the rigidly unified constructions of the outer world are replaced by infinite subjective interpretations. The thirty-eight studios with their numerous mirrors become sites of a multitude of possibilities. With these infinite mirrors with their unlimited reflections, Genet takes the metatheatrical aspect of *The Balcony* to a completely new level. Rima Drell Reck points out to this blurring of lines:

Questioning the distinction between real and imagined, valid and invalid, Genet's play subtly erases the line between theatre and the world and creates a complicity between spectator and

actor which is not based upon identification with the dramatic personage. Instead, the spectator is involved in the play to the same extent that the play is involved in reality: they are similarly uncertain, or, to put it in another way, both partake of a measure of illusion or appearance.

(Reck, 24)

Genet does not merely stop at reflecting and commenting on the very nature of theatre itself. Reflections and counter reflections within the role-playing in the House of Illusions are only the constituents of the first level of a much larger picture. As earlier pointed out, every new dominant order is questioned in a chain-like process, which points to the constant conversion of subversive potential into repressive power. In other words, Genet's alternative universe is not a fixed or absolute entity. It gets constantly created, within each instance of questioning those in power.

In a candid interview by Edward de Grazia, Genet made it amply clear that his works were not created with a deliberately political purpose. In his own words:

Because literature...doesn't begin by positing the problem of homosexuality or heterosexuality or Marxism or whatever. It begins by constructing a sentence. It begins with the choice of vocabulary. That's what literature is built upon. I didn't write my books in order to liberate homosexuals...I wrote my books for a completely different reason: for the taste of words, even for the taste of the commas of punctuation, for the taste of the sentence. (Interview, 314)

Although Genet leaves no scope for ambiguity and his words ring clear, the subjective interpretation of his plays is an open choice. Given the politics of what Genet represents in *The Balcony*, what is important is that his work has tremendous subversive potential, through inversion, or otherwise.

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Notes

ⁱThe date of performance (1957) refers to the world premiere of *The Balcony*, which took place on April 22, 1957, in London, at the Arts Theatre Club.

ⁱⁱThese words appear in Bettina Knapp's notes to the ninth chapter of her book, *Jean Genet*.

ⁱⁱⁱThe said category, "Theatre of the Absurd", created by Martin Esslin, is not a term that the playwrights included in this category themselves agreed with. Esslin pointed to a number of commonalities, basing the term on the same, clubbing several playwrights under this banner, namely Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter.

^{iv}The term "Absurd playwrights" has been used to signify the playwrights that were clubbed together by Martin Esslin.

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