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A theatre of possibilities and contestations: Reading Jean Genet from the margins and his theatre as the site of deconstructing power in his plays *The Maids* and *The Balcony*.

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Abstract

*I came across the name of Jean Genet: a name that carries the potential to raise a few eyebrows even in the 21st century, when I was obsessively reading on subculture. Dick Hebdige introduces his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*¹, by quoting Genet from the opening pages of his book *The Thief's Journal*- and this is how I first came across the name of a notorious intellectual who was the embodiment of rebellion in his times. I knew Genet initially as the Promethean rebel figure, who constructed new fads and fashions in France and crafted an extension (a balcony) beyond from where one glance beyond the set parameters of culture (home).*

Struggles and contestations are brought into the realm of unlimited possibilities, i.e., into theatre by Genet where there is no fear of death or a fear of the deceptive operations of power. Theatre in Genet's case becomes a sacred platform of continuous transformations where signifiers could be explored to produce new meanings which at times carry a subversive potential, and also at times to provoke people who are pre-occupied in the forty winks of a nine to five life. He creates hierarchies and binaries on stage to dismantle them, stage is altered into a secular space where

¹ Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen & Co, London & New York, 1985.

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object transgresses the boundaries and attains its subjectivity to become “other”. Genet’s writings have been deconstructed by partaking various perspectives but not much research had been taken up to look at Genet’s plays from a post-facto reading of Genet works as the voice of discontent and a spatially displaced icon of rebellion of the 60’s.

*My paper would try and elaborate on Genet’s approach to writing keeping in mind his marginalized position both as a public ward, as a thief and a homosexual wherein he explores the inert possibility of transforming even crime into art. The operations of power in the realms of gender, class etc are fractured by Genet’s conscious use of methods like cross-dressing, role playing etc. In his plays like *The Balcony* and *The Maids* he juxtaposes and complements binaries like reality and imagination to shock and awe the audience.*

Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular societyⁱ.

-Michel Foucault

Revolutions are not always simultaneous in the fields of arts, literature and politics. It sometimes happens that political and social revolutions retain, when they obtain power, that which was most academic in the culture or civilization, they have already displaced...The man who has made the biggest contribution to the liberation of homosexuals is, I think, a man who was not liberated in any way and certainly wasn’t homosexual, that’s Freud...He did it by unveiling the pansexuality and eroticism which is at the basis of all sexuality, and by showing the lack of differentiation in sexuality, or sexuality, or bisexuality, of childrenⁱⁱ.

-Jean Genet

“I knew Genet before I knew Genet”. Perhaps, this is the most absurd introductory statement that a paper could initiate in order to put forth any argument, but alas! I could not think of a better alternative.

I came across the name of Jean Genet (1910-1986): a name that carries the potential to raise a few eyebrows even in the 21st century, when I was obsessively reading on subculture. Dick Hebdige introduces his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*ⁱⁱⁱ, by quoting Genet from the opening pages of his book *The Thief's Journal*- and this is how I first came across the name of a notorious intellectual who was the embodiment of rebellion in his times and who is till date revered in the present times not by intellectuals as well as iconoclasts. Through my readings I was initially introduced to Genet as the Promethean rebel figure, who constructed new fads and fashions in France and crafted an extension (a balcony) beyond from where one glance beyond the set parameters of culture (home). But with time I realized his potential as a playwright, novelist, a poet and above all a man who understood his position and fought for his rights and what he ardently believed to be right. And it is these struggles and contestations that he continuously strived for are brought into the realm of unlimited possibilities, i.e., into theatre by Genet where there is no fear of death or a fear of the deceptive operations of power.

Theatre in Genet's case becomes a sacred platform of continuous transformations where signifiers could be explored to produce new meanings which at times carry a subversive potential, and also at times to provoke people who are pre-occupied in the forty winks of a nine to five life. He creates hierarchies and binaries on stage to dismantle them, stage is altered into a secular space where object transgresses the boundaries and attains its subjectivity to become “other”. Genet's writings have been deconstructed by partaking various perspectives but not much research had been taken up to look at Genet's plays from a post-facto reading of Genet works as the voice of discontent and a spatially displaced icon of rebellion of the 60's.

What were 60's all about? This question is countered by the immediate response from most people as an era of rebellion, sexual promiscuity, defiance of existing codes, protest against atrocities like Vietnam War etc. But if we probe a little bit deeper into the “apparently” most

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obvious era then there is a possibility of unearthing transformations that were rooted in socio-economic factors. For an example, let us take up the case of Hippie movement. Hippie a figure who is generally associated with a white man/woman who lives like a vagabond, dopes, dresses in weird clothes etc is in fact a subversion of codes that were common in ghettos of blacks.

Clarence Major, in his study *Juba to live: A Dictionary of African American Slang*, traces the origins of hip to the Wolof Verb *hepi* (“to see”) or *hipi* (“to open one’s eyes), and dates its usage in America to the 1700s. So from the linguistic start, *hip* is a term of *enlightenment*.^{iv}

The entire series of changes through time from a black hippie to a white hippie becomes an instance “celebrating the otherness” by adopting the fashions and styles of the “other” whose customs are often looked down at in that respective historical epoch. This aping of fashions and cultivating the colloquial English of the ghettos was the result of the close communication among the non-white and the white working class population at spheres of work etc. Later on, these fashions, lifestyles were also adapted by the people of better economic and social classes to express rebellion in terms of politics, ideologies and later on to completely reject the much touted social values regarding sex, drugs, routine way of living, home etc. Leon E. Wynter in his book *American Skin: Popculture, Big Business and The End of White America* draws the readers attention towards the socio-economic aspects of this new identity formation which could be other words termed as cultural miscegenation that the working class whites promoted and the upper class whites rejected who had the power to legitimize social activities thereby giving the status quo of “popular culture”. I quote him

White kids who embraced the markers of non-white cultural identity opted out of the mainstream, as defined, and thus out of whiteness itself...Like the subset of white youth in almost every generation before them, these kids had come to understand

that cultural whiteness didn't completely capture their reality...Negro role models was a small price to pay, because at some level they understood that despite their white skin, they had more in common with the black kids...Not that they were politically conscious liberals, touched by the spirit of brotherhood...these white kids with the look of the streets shared something more organic with their fashion mentors than progressive political rhetoric at the putative dawn of the Age of Aquarius.^v

Like this entire movement that was initiated by individuals who were the object of discrimination, economically, racially etc., and formed an alternative mode of living. Genet and his writings could be read keeping in mind his marginalized position both as a public ward, as a thief and a homosexual. To a large extent his writings are an answer to the systematically categorized society and also a medium of his liberation, as well as for the audience who is watching his plays where he explores the inert possibility of transforming even crime into art. The operations of power in the realms of gender, class etc are fractured by Genet's conscious use of methods like cross-dressing, role playing etc. In his plays like *The Balcony* and *The Maids* he juxtaposes and complements binaries like reality and imagination to shock and awe the audience. The mimicked reality decodes power relations existent in real life on the stage. The operation of ideological structures beyond the consciousness is manifested on stage through characters deprived of subjectivity. Maids, prostitutes, outlaws are released from the perpetual vigilance of the dominating power structures on stage in his plays. The stage in this case does not try to mimic reality or recreate the realist setting; quite contrarily it becomes a space of heightened excesses. The stage directions and the props in the play *Balcony* in fact act as an introduction to both the style as well as various kinds of exaggeration that would be handled in different ways through out the performance of the play to break hierarchies' and illusions which are a product of it.

The set seems to represent sacristy, formed by three blood-red, cloth folding-screens. The one at the rear has a built-in door. Above, a huge Spanish crucifix ... THE

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BISHOP *in mitre and gilded cope*, is sitting in a chair. He is obviously larger than life. The role is played by an actor is wearing *tragedian's cothurni* about twenty inches high...He wears garish make up...At the side, a woman, rather young, highly made up and wearing a lace dressing gown...^{vi}

The action which succeeds this stage direction that has repeatedly emphasized on the vocalization of excesses with the use of “garish make up”, “actor wearing...*tragedian's cothurni*” etc; acts as ruptures in the illusion created on stage of reality and the audience are transferred into a locale of disreputable reputation i.e., a brothel. The force and effect nexus/ the effect generated by the illocutionary effect and perlocutionary effect of performance in Genet theatre grounds itself in metaphors and metonymy which in turn attempts to create art which leads towards a language which is pure and precedes all *ipseity*^{vii}(hospitality and hostility) and locates itself in a Bakhtinian carnivalesque space which seeks to

...to devise new matrices between objects and ideas that will answer to their real nature, to once again line up and join together those things that had been falsely disunified and distanced from one another – as well as to disunite those things that had been falsely brought into proximity.... All these... are aimed primarily at destroying the established hierarchy of values, at bringing down the high and raising up the low, at destroying every nook and cranny of the habitual picture of the world....^{viii}

Language in Genet always exists in its ‘potential to be’. Any attempt to formulate an ‘I’ or an identity can only be the performative act of ‘I can’. Any performative act of language in its meaning-to-be, be it linguistic, cultural, aesthetic, in his writings opens itself out to its infinite responsibility towards the “other”. Genet in his writings accepts that he is fascinated by the oriental theatre which runs on metaphors, suggestions unlike the occidental theatre which was in his time more about recreating reality to the minutest detail possible^{ix}. His theatre as a ritual has

strong resonances of ritualistic practices engulfed in theatricality like the pagan festivities associated with the Dionysian festival in Greece or theatricality that is leant to Indian performances as indicated in *Natyashastra* from Yajurveda or the liturgical practice of Eucharist in Christianity. Like the “twice born” God Dionysus whose “death and rebirth were events of mystical reverence”^x and the festival of Dionysia celebrated in his honour where the performers wore masks and reveled Genet’s theatre also becomes a space where he frees his audience from being self-conscious and subverts the oppressive space of theatre that is governed by logic and powerful norms of realism that was predominant in those times. This extra space that is leased by ritualistic practices encoded in metaphors becomes a site of negotiations, contestations and rebellion against the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)^{xi}.

In Genet’s plays the dismantling of codes and power takes place on two levels in theatre, “a place in the world where theatricality does not conceal any power”^{xii}. Firstly, The operations of hierarchies which grounds itself on the other in terms of class, gender etc are deconstructed on stage where the subjectivity of “self” could only be attained through the “other” which is succinctly explored via role playing as for example in instances like that of Scene II in *The Balcony*

THE JUDGE (with a start): A scarf? Ah ha, so that’s it? Why the scarf? Eh? What were you going to do with it? Whom were you planning to strangle? Answer. Who? ... Are you a thief or a strangler? (*Very gently imploring*) Tell me, my child, I beg of you, tell me you’re a thief.

THE THIEF: Yes, my lord.

THE EXECUTIONER: No!

THE THIEF (*looking at him in surprise*): No?

THE EXECUTIONER: That’s for later.

THE THIEF: Eh?

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THE EXECUTIONER: I mean the confession is supposed to come later. Plead not guilty.

THE THIEF: What, and get beaten again!

THE JUDGE: (*mealy-mouthed*): Exactly, my child: and get beaten. You must first deny, then admit and repent...

THE JUDGE: (*reassuming the theatrical tone and resuming the reading*): Let her speak. I like that pulling voice of hers, the 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?^{xiii}

In this case, the customer of the brothel could only act as a perfect model of the judge if only he has the perfect model of thief in front of him. One is incomplete without the other and at the same time the thief is pushed into extreme conditions of torture because that is the only medium for the judge to attain his own subjectivity. The same method to attain subjectivity is applied in his other play *The Maids* where Claire one of the two maids of Madame acts like Madame and her sister Solange; pretends to be Claire. This play begins by introducing Claire to the audience as Madame. And it is in the middle of the play that the audience is made aware that they were being deceived by play acting, when Claire says

Let's hurry! Madame'll be back. [She starts to unfasten her dress.] Help me.^{xiv}

Claire and Solange through their role playing try to fit themselves into roles that were not tailored for them by destiny. The extra space of the "other", who cannot be a legitimate part of the ideology of the dominant power structures and culture moves into the terrain of art. The theatre becomes a place where one could escape the role playing of mundane life and at the same time to attain consciousness about life that: after all we are role playing where our roles are

assigned by the power structures around us and in order to be recognized as a good “subject” one should operate within the given parameters. Since, in theatre death is not the sentence for transgression unlike real life it provides space for the “object” to attain subjectivity and there is always an alternative in the next performance and this possibility of transformation that has the potentiality to bring forth something new is suggested by Solange when she suggests to Claire hurriedly “Lets get right into the transformation”. The closure of *The Maids* brings forth this possibility in the most apt and precise manner possible

The orchestra is playing brilliantly. The attendant is raising the red velvet curtain. He bows. Madame is descending the stairs. Her furs brush against the green plants. Madame steps into the car. Monsieur is whispering sweet nothings in her ear. She would like to smile, but she is dead. She rings the bell. The porter yawns. He opens the door. Madame goes up the stairs. She enters her apartment-but, Madame is dead. Her two maids are alive: they’ve just risen up, free, from Madame’s icy form. All maids were present at her side-not they themselves, but rather the hellish agony of the names. And all that remains of them to float about Madame’s airy corpse is the delicate perfume of the holy maidens which they were in secret. We are beautiful, joyous, drunk and free. ^{xv}

Genet’s *mimetes* perform two functions at the same time: they bring forth the *mimesthai* on one hand and on the other they critique the culture around them which is nothing but mimesis of all that is considered to be virtuous or there is a perpetual threat of being relegated into the margins. Most of the characters of Genet in both the plays in discussion are not named like the prisoners, the mods, the teddy boys, the hippies who are either numbered in a systematic fashion by the state or are generalized and compressed into one homogeneous identity that signifies their distance from the culture or by the roles they play in real life.

Secondly, the power operating through the gaze of the spectator at the time of the performance is refracted into different for

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The gaze...corresponds to desire, the desire for self-completion through another. There is a struggle over the gaze: one gets to look, to be master of the gaze; the other (or Other) looked at...The subject-turned-object sees itself as the other sees it: it internalizes the gaze^{xvi}

Thereby Genet's theatre leads to the breaking the wall between the actors and spectators and by makes the spectator conscious of his/her voyeuristic pleasure by presenting the illusion created on stage as illusion by excessive use of make-up, theatrical costumes and also through dialogues at times. The spectator is elevated from the passive status of a distant observer into an active element of the performance who has to bear the implications of his/her gaze. Similarly the hierarchical codes of sexuality and personal sexual choices are set aside in the realm of theatre. Genet presents his central characters of the play *The Maids* Claire and Solange and Irma of *The Balcony* as female only as a negation to the patriarchy existent in the society.

Genet's theatre if envisioned from a new perspective emerges as the theatre of a subculture artist who seeks freedom in art and life and the liberty to assign new meanings/signifiers to the objects existing in the society. Genet through his theatre tries to present the "ideology"^{xvii} that is ingrained in the unconscious on stage in the most explicit form possible and, in the process deconstructs hierarchies present in the society that are reflected on stage, and emerges as an artist who maintains critical distance of alienation from both society and art.

Notes

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen & Co, London & New York, 1985.
- ^{iv} Leland, John, *Hip: the history*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2004.
- ^v Wynter. E. Leon, *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business and The End of White America*, Crown Publishers, New York, 2002. pp. 18.
- ^{vi} Genet, Jean, *The Balcony* (Ed., Mangalam), B, Worldview publications, New Delhi, India, 2001, pp.5.
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- ^{viii} Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998.
- ^{ix} Markus. B. Thomas, *Jean Genet: The Theatre of the Perverse*, Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. 14, No. 3, (Oct., 1962), pp. 209-214.
- ^x en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus as accesses on 31st May 2013.
- ^{xi} Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)' (in *La Pensee*, 1970), in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press: New York, 1971, pp. 127-86
- ^{xii} Genet, Jean, *The truth is possible only when I am alone* in Genet, Jean, *The Balcony*. Opcit. pp 106.
- ^{xiii} Genet, Jean, *The Balcony*, Opcit., pp. 12-13.
- ^{xiv} Genet, Jean, *Two plays: The Maids and Deathwatcher*, Grove Press, New York, 1982. pp-46.
- ^{xv} Opcit., pp.99-100.
- ^{xvi} Olin, Markin, *Gaze*, in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert. S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2003. pp. 325-326.
- ^{xvii} Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)' (in *La Pensee*, 1970), in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Opcit.,

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