

Whither is Bound Humanity: A Scrutiny of the Select Plays of Sharon Pollock

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Abstract

A torchbearer of history and a dramatist awakening the humane self, buried deep in the quagmire of social evils, Sharon Pollock has won laurels in the realm of Canadian Literature. According to Pollock, Canadians think of themselves as a clique of cultured race who have never partaken in historical transgressions and atrocities. But that is a mistaken notion. Canadian history is bleak only because it has been dishonestly bowdlerized. This contention voiced forth by Pollock paves the way for subverting the myth of Canada. Her *Plays Komagata Maru Incident* and *One Tiger to Hill* present Canada in its true colours. Pollock unearths the archives of history in order to give an avant-garde explication about the Canadian past. The objective of the paper is to scrutinize the historical dossiers connected with the Komatagaru Incident of 1914 and the New Westminster hostage-taking of 1975. An analysis of the plays relying upon the chronicles is attempted to find out the discrepancy between history and reality. Canada though glorified as a multicultural mosaic and a democratic union has in reality traces of internal colonialism, racism and Eurocentric attitude pushing the voiceless to the margins. The plays bear testimony of the unheard agonies of the minorities. The two epithets that captures the essence of the plays selected are “Brown Children” referring to the Indians who relocated to Canada and “Waste Paper Basket,” an appropriate synonym for ‘prison.’

Keywords: historical dossiers, myth of Canada, Brown Children, Waste Paper Basket

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“Canadians have a view of themselves as nice civilized people who have never participated in historical crimes and atrocities. But that view is false. Our history is dull only because it has been dishonestly expurgated.”

This contention voiced forth by the much-acclaimed Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock paves the way for subverting the myth of Canada. Her *Plays Komagata Maru Incident* and *One Tiger to Hill* present Canada in its true colours. Pollock unearths the archives of history in order to give an avant-garde explication about the Canadian past. The objective of the paper is to scrutinize the historical dossiers connected with the Komatagaru Incident of 1914 and the New Westminster hostage-taking of 1975. An analysis of the plays relying upon the chronicles is attempted to find out the discrepancy between history and reality. The two epithets that captures the essence of the plays selected are “Brown Children” referring to the Indians who relocated to Canada and “Waste Paper Basket,” an appropriate synonym for ‘prison.’

The Komagata Maru Incident first produced by the Vancouver Playhouse in 1976 under Larry Lillo's direction, has secured Pollock's prominence as an issue-oriented playwright. It draws on the actual event – the government's abnegation in 1914 to permit Sikh immigrants to land on Canadian soil – for its story in a highly theatrical presentation style developed through the metaphor of a circus with a ring-master-cum-baker called T.S.

Pollock in his memorable drama has given a new interpretation to the Komagata Maru Incident. According to the census report of 1900, there were 2050 people from India on the North American continent. The majority of these people were Punjabis who came in search of fresh woods and pastures new with the hope of finding work in order to improve their economy. Once they set foot into the Canadian soil, they had to encounter hardships and discrimination. Canadians feared that the surge of Indian immigrants would be a threat to their jobs in factories, mills and lumber yards, so they decided on curtailing the "brown invasion."

British Columbia initiated stringent laws discouraging the immigration of Indians to Canada. Indians should possess 200 pounds to get into British Columbia for their enroute direct from India. But this huge amount could not be afforded by an average Indian whose earnings were only ten cents per day. In addition, the Canadian government was sly enough to prevent steamship companies from issuing tickets to Indians. The condition of the already settled Indo-Canadians was becoming worse as a bill was passed in 1907 depriving their right to vote, not permitting them to serve as judges, clerks, barristers or pharmacists. While the government was bent upon stopping the brown invasion, they were magnanimous in allowing Japanese and Chinese immigration. Enraged and disheartened by the inhuman strategy of the Canadian policies, Gurdit Singh, an affluent Punjabi business magnet chartered the Japanese steamer liner, the Komagata Maru. This ship set sail from Hongkong, halting in Japan and spearheading to Canada as an outright defiance to the newly formulated laws. The dreams and aspirations of 376 Punjabis among whom 340 were Sikhs, 12 Hindus and 24 Muslims were shattered to pieces as the ship was eventually turned back at Vancouver. According to Pollock:

In 1914, the Komagata Maru, a Japanese steamer, entered Vancouver Harbour carrying 376 potential immigrants of East Asian origin. The majority were veterans of the British army and all were British subjects. As such, they had right of entry to Canada guaranteed by their membership in the British Empire. However, they were forbidden entry . . . for the following two months the Komagata Maru lay at anchor . . . with those aboard suffering much deprivation, while political, legal and racial skirmishes ensued. Inspector William Hopkinson of the Immigration Department was instrumental in negotiations with those aboard and was involved in the formation of a ring of informers within the Sikh Community. (226)

The British Press highlighted this event using inflammatory jargons "Hindu Invasion of Canada," "Boat loads of Hindus on way to Vancouver." The authorities in British Columbia were bent upon their determination never to allow Hindus to land in Canada. Totally paralyzed by this callous mindset of the White bureaucrats, the entire Indian community in Canada united to make their voice heard. Meetings were convened in the Gurudwaras regarding how to tackle the issue. The Government after seven weeks permitted twenty passengers who could give testimony to their previous residence in Canada. With a heavy heart, the rest of the passengers had to return to India. This incident paved the way for further turmoil like a riot in India, sidelining of Sikhs in Vancouver.

In the play, William Hopkinson, the Immigration Inspector is assigned the role of a stooge like the Major in Pollock's play *Walsh*. The responsibility invested on Hopkinson is to detain passengers on board

the Komagata Maru. Besides he functions as a spy monitoring the actions of the Sikh community in Vancouver who try their level best to aid the passengers gain entry into Canada. His mixed heritage is his vulnerability. His mother's Punjabi origin infuses a flavour of Eastern psyche in him. In addition, his father though a British Sergeant has affinities with India that unwittingly runs in his blood. Stranded in the labyrinth of mixed heritage, Hopkinson is in the horns of a dilemma. With sheer determination, he attempts to negotiate favourably for his Government, yet his conscience haunts him. He is torn between his sense of duty and the realization that he is a mere "toy man walking through a toy town" (285). The Sikhs realize that he acts as an agent to betray his own people and in a fit of rage Mewa Singh assassinates Hopkinson. Moments before his death he acknowledges his real identity and the hypocritical role he was forced to assume. Mixed emotions of joy and sorrow surge up in the mind of Hopkinson during the last moments of his life. According to Holder, "In Pollock's play, Hopkinson actually embraces his assassin, reversing the lifelong rejection of his Indian identity. Caught between his identification with the oppressor and the oppressed, Hopkinson dies a most ironic death.

The Komagata Maru Incident is noted for its unique presentation of a chain of naturalistic scenes coupled with imaginative backdrop. Pollock disheartened by the reports in the newspapers tries to unfurl the pages of history in an entertaining way as stated,

When I read the newspaper accounts of the day, I discovered the wonderful circus or carnival atmosphere of the dock area with the marching bands and popcorn, the apples and balloons . . . Then I thought, if this is a carnival or circus, I could have a master of ceremonies. Then who would be the wild animal? Well. Of course, the savage beast is the person sitting out on the Komagata Maru. (70)

The Master of Ceremonies adorns the role of a magician and barker. With an air of audacity he explicates, commands the characters, and creates a carnival atmosphere of a circus. T.S devoid of the milk of human kindness pays a deaf year to Hopkinson's information regarding the eligibility of the Sikh passengers as military veterans to enter Canadian territory. According to T.S, "The word is no entry" (236). He is clever enough to identify the loop holes in the law for his personal aggrandizement. The Canadian immigration Department is quite aware of the fact that there is no steam ship line with a direct route from most Asian countries. Yet they insist on direct embarkation without any midway anchorage. In order to weaken the grit and resolve of the inmates of the ship, the officials latently follow the tagline 'starve and leave.' To T.S, the immigrants are no better than beasts, so he refers to them as "It".

The dark shades of history have to be brought to the limelight in order to root out the evils of the society. Hence Pollock asserts that "until we recognize our past, we cannot change our future." The injustice, inhumanity and racism raging in the Canadian soil gets unearthed through the pages of the play. The Immigration Department of the Canadian Government acts as a hard task master symbolising the much-pondered question 'whither lies humanity?'. While politically inclined, Pollock also heightens the emotional impact by presenting an Asian mother consoling her ailing child. she whimpers behind the grill symbolizing the cage. To Pollock, "Theatre should hit people emotionally, in my opinion and that is my intention with the play" (107). Canada though glorified as a multicultural mosaic and a democratic union has in reality traces of internal colonialism, racism and Eurocentric attitude pushing the voiceless to the margins. The play bears testimony of the unheard agonies of the minorities.

The New Westminster Penitentiary hostage-taking of 1975 served as the backdrop of the fictional prison drama *One Tiger to a Hill*. The Maximum Security Prison in British Columbia became the brutal site of the cruel-blooded murder of a young female Classification Officer Mary Steinhauser. This gut-wrenching incident is poignantly depicted by Pollock in her play. Pollock portrays the crimes committed

by the two prisoners that landed them in solitary confinement –Gillie Mac Dermott and Tommy Paul, a Metis, “Mac Dermott shot some poor Chinese grocer in front of his kids. He shot him four times because he wasn’t fast enough with the till. And Tommy Paul, who got a contract and knocked on a door and when the door opened, he blew half a girl’s head away and he shut the door, ditched the gun and went out for a beer. That’s who you’re talking to. You don’t make deals with people like that” (105). Eight hundred and four days in solitary confinement was indeed nerve-racking for Tommy Paul. He pours out his mental anguish and emotional turmoil he faced in isolation:

TOMMY PAUL: “In the last four years I spent over eight hundred days in the hole, solitary, top tier, concrete vault where they bury you. Eleven by six-foot coffin. Four solid walls. Six-inch window in a steel door. Light in the ceiling they never turn off. I shower-wearing steel shackles and cuffs. If I’m lucky I shave twice a week in cold water” (125).

Dede Walker believes that it is natural for the convicts to kill themselves in the hole. They do that to prove that they are alive, to prove that they have got freedom of choice. Dede Walker and Frank Soholuk in their role as the rehabilitation officers counsel them in order to retain their balanced mind. But in due course of time Soholuk understands the futility of the rehabilitation work. When he rants about her helpless condition Walker advises him, “you are banging your head on a steel door. Go where you can do some real good” (84). Getting a transfer or overseas posting would be a better option for her. Walker is unhappy over the stance of the society that craves for peace and not for justice. In the midst of all entanglements, she is determined to cope up. Paul and Gille alleged the Government for not keeping up their promises to offer compensatory recreations like flight to Cuba and Russia, an allowance of 50,000 bucks, recreation and vocational training. Their pressing demand was to know the real fate of Guy Desjardins in confinement.

A corporation lawyer by profession, Everett Chalmers owns a firm. Day in and day out while driving past the prison which seemed a replica of a medieval fortress with grey stone walls and bleak turrets, the sight of the ‘pen’ raised many a thought in his mind. As a bolt from the blue, Chalmers was entrusted with the duty of acting as a mediator for the untoward incidents of riots, death, offences and counter offences. For Chalmers, prison is no more than a waste basket as he says,

CHALMERS: “I got involved, and two people died to confirm a resolve, a resolve that was slowly and reluctantly growing in me – a resolve to find out what happens to them when we condemn men to that waste basket, we call the pen” (77).

Once realizing the magnitude of the real situation inside the carceral institution, his mind rages between the autocratic functioning of the bureaucrats and the liberal young social workers who are more inclined to use therapy. McGowen, Head of the security never budged to the requests made by the inmates and the rehabilitation officers to penalize or at least conduct an inquiry against the guard Carl Hanzuk who was in charge of the pen on the fatal night of Desjardins death. He backs the guard, “I back, the guard, the union backs the guard” (79). The demise of Desjardins does not evoke any sorrow or sympathy in him. A rumour spreads that the lifers would be transported to an unknown destination via an International flight. Hanzuk, the apple of the eyes of MacGowen, is entrusted with the task of overseeing the transfer of the inmates into the helicopters. Chalmers supposing such a transplantation to be a trap joins them. The play ends with Hanzuk firing at Paul and Walker, a pair who wished to be each other’s best companions. Deceit and injustice triumph leaving the inmates of the prison with little hope. Dawn of liberation is a mirage with jurisprudence favouring the dominant cluster.

A sojourn through the two historiographic meta dramas of Pollock bring to the limelight the real scenario of the nexus and praxis of the Canadian penology thereby subverting the myth of the nation. Western world eulogized for its multicultural mosaic concept has its dark shadows of tapestry of injustice, inhumanity and indifference.

Works-Cited

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