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A Seamless Transition from the Fictional to the Real in Anuradha Marwah's *A Pipe Dream in Delhi*

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Abstract:

Anuradha Marwah's *A Pipe Dream in Delhi* is a One-Act play based on the serial killing that happened in Noida in 2006 and deals with the issues like poverty, inequality, kidnapping, rape, cannibalism, organ-selling and so on. Sveta, a young teacher, is service-minded and teaches English to the slum children through a play-way method by choosing Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin". The rehearsal goes on and when it is about to end, it becomes real. The mythological Pied Piper of Browning reappears today as an archetype and abducts all the slum children save a lame boy. Thus the fictional is transformed into the real and such re-enactments in human life remind one of the continuity of the presence of evil amidst the good. The dramatic technique of invisible transition in this play's action is characteristic of the playwright's innovation.

Keywords: Social issues, Noida serial killing.

Author Introduction

Anuradha Marwah was born in 1962 in Ajmer, Rajasthan. She did her B.A. and M.A. in the University of Rajasthan, M. Phil and Ph. D. in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She was a Teaching Fellow at Jawaharlal Nehru University from 1985-1986. She has worked as a Lecturer in English at Sriram College of Commerce, Delhi University; at Miranda House, Delhi University from October 1987 to 1988. She is presently working as Associate Professor of English at Zakir Husain College, Delhi University. Anuradha Marwah has written short skits and some full-length plays. Her full-length plays are *Margins*, *Sarkari Feminism*, *A Pipe Dream in Delhi*, and *Danger Zones*. *Margins* is a thirty-minute-play performed by Pandies' Theatre in 2007 in Delhi, Ajmer, Bangalore, and Kanpur. *Danger Zones* was performed by Pandies Theatre in 2009 in Delhi and Bangalore. *Sarkari Feminism*, written both in Hindi-English, is a 100 minute-play performed by Pandies' Theatre in Delhi, Ajmer and at the Bolanjir theatre festival in 2010. The play is a multi-layered dark comedy and analyses the government's progress in its contradictory feminist politics. It explores women's issues, probing the earnestness of middle class-centric activism by incorporating an activist theatre group within the narrative. The play confronts its audience and by implicating it among the reasons for victimization of women seeks to involve it in a process of seeking a more enabling role for itself.

A Pipe Dream in Delhi started off as a 30 minute-play that was performed by Pandies' Theatre in 2008 in Delhi and Bangalore. A scene from this play was presented at Women Playwrights' International Conference (WPIC) in Stockholm in August 2012. The play, based on

the serial killing that happened in Nithari, near Noida in India, deals with the rights of the marginalized children. The play uses Robert Browning's poem "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" as a tying thread and reveals the callous hypocrisy of the adult world towards child desires. *Danger Zones* consists of three plots. The first plot is the theme of *A Pipe Dream in Delhi*, the second plot deals with issues of alternate sexuality and draws on decades of experience of dealing with women's issues. The play deals with a working class lesbian couple and examines its travails. The third moves into the future and re-examines the country's negotiations with capitalism in the light of the phenomenon of the Special Economic Zones.

Marwah has written book articles and reviews for fiction, poetry and criticism for national newspapers and journals. Anuradha's reviews include Ania Loomba's *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*; Salman Rushdie's *Shame*; Salman Rushdie's *The Jaguar Smile*; Khushwant Singh's *Delhi, A Novel*; *Narrative Forms and Transformations* which was edited by Sudhakar Marathe and Meenakshi Mukherjee; Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Crow Eaters*. She has co-authored a book, *Creative Writing: A Manual for Beginners* in 2008. Her novels are *The Higher Education of Geetika Mehendiratta* (1993), *Idol Love* (1999) and *Dirty Picture* (2007). She has also penned a few poems like "Waiting", "The Guru" which are published in various journals and anthologies like *In Their Own Voice: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets*. She has also written short stories, published in various journals. To name a few, "Lifework," "I Will, I Won't," "An Odd Couple," "The Patriot," "A Second Chance," and "Mature Learner".

Analysis: Transition from the fictional to the real

A Pipe Dream in Delhi, written by Delhi-based Anuradha Marwah, is based on the serial killing that happened in Nithari at Noida near New Delhi in 2006 and brings under the scanner the issues like poverty, social inequality, kidnapping, rape, cannibalism, organ-selling and so on. In December 2006, thirty-eight human skeletons were unearthed from clogged drains behind a rich industrialist's palatial house in Noida. They were the remains of some of the poor children who had gone missing from Nithari, the adjoining urban village in Noida. They are mostly migrated people from small towns or villages in search of employment. The parents and relatives, who are mainly migrant workers and daily wage earners, had made several complaints to the police about the thirty eight missing children, mainly girls, from their locality and been callously turned away on one pretext or another by India's law enforcers. This bizarre and gory tale of kidnapping, rape, murder, cannibalism, and organ sale monopolized the media attention for several months that followed (*A Pipe Dream in Delhi*, hereinafter referred to as *PDD 1*). The facilitators from Pandies' theatre, who were working with children of the urban village Nithari, narrated this story of shocking incident to the playwright. Actually, the playwright was inspired by Robert Browning's well-known poem, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." Taking the story of Pied Piper from the poem, Anuradha Marwah has merged the real incident with the folk-tale of the Pied Piper and presented a thought-provoking play. This play invokes and interrogates representations of a real-life incident.

The playwright presents the aptly-fitting stanzas of the poem at regular intervals with the dialogues of the characters. The Pied Piper in the poem was invited to Hamelin to help the people end rats' menace. He was promised to pay 20,000 cents and the Pied Piper started playing a mellifluous tune that attracted all the rats to follow him and made them finally drown in the nearby river. But they failed to pay him the money they promised and paid only 50 cents. In revenge, the Pied Piper started playing another tune which lured all the children in the town. All the children followed him and disappeared with him near the mountain top for ever.

The Pied Piper in the play is 'a modern Pied Piper' who enters the stage as a formidable fantasy figure. The play pictures two divisions of people: the urban/village slum and their activities at the night school there and the urban middle class people represented by two couples, Meenakshi and Ratish as hosts, and Nonita and her husband as guests. Meenakshi's daughter Shveta, the young teacher who belongs to the urban middle class family, bridges the gap between the two divisions of the society. She appears to be the playwright's mouthpiece and also a representative of the dynamic younger generation, growing impatient with the injustices happening all around. Shveta volunteers to teach English to the slum children at a night school in the play-way method by acting out Browning's poem, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." Though she represents the middle class in her all external bearings, in her heart of hearts, she identifies herself with the poor. She is service-minded and plans to get a project from foreign funding agency for the betterment of children. In this way, she is an eye-opener for the youth in India.

Even after sixty seven years of Independence, India has not attained satisfactory progress on all fronts. India wears a mask of the 'shining India' hiding the 'shunned India'. Still no city is free from slums and the rich-poor divide prevailing in India widens more and more. Migrant workers move from place to place in search of employment for survival and settle in clusters for short terms as floating population. They live in the squalid surroundings where huts are erected in a haphazard manner without proper access and minimum basic amenities. They resort to anti-social activities like drug addiction, alcoholism, smuggling, rape, murder, and so on for their survival. Most mothers of these families have many children and the fathers are mostly incapable of taking care of their family and mostly alcoholics. So it is the duty of the matriarch to look after their families. When they struggle for their mere existence, these marginalized children's education remains a dream. Unplanned family and poverty-stricken condition ultimately lead to child labour. Girl children like Rajini and Gita in the play work as servant maids in middle class homes and boys like Suresh and Anthony work in some factories and industries. Even worse is the condition of the urchins like Raju who are left parentless on the streets. Most of the jobs done by these children are rag-picking, collecting firewood, tending animals, street vending, dyeing, domestic labour, begging, stealing, and so on. For instance, when Shveta's father Manish stopped his car, Raju rushes up to clean the car, engages him in a conversation to distract his attention and then steals Manish's mobile.

Good education is neither affordable nor accessible to the downtrodden children like Rajini, Gita, Anthony, Suresh and Raju. So they spend their whole day playing about in the streets in dirt and filth. Though education is provided free to slum children, the dropouts' number

remains high and many students could not pursue higher education. To aid these children, Shveta spends her spare time in teaching them English at the night school in their slum. English language has become indispensable today and it is vital in this competitive world. Children who lack even the basic school education consider the play-way method as the easy way of learning. Shveta has understood the child psychology and cleverly inspires them to learn English. When the play opens, it is understood that the teacher has already started her classes and given some assignments to children, so they are required to rehearse a drama that forms the part of that day's class. But their practice is getting gravitated toward Bollywood style.

Indian cinema permeates every layer of social hierarchy and the slum children are not an exception. They are preoccupied with the cinematic dare-devil adventures and larger-than-life portrayals of human beings. The children tease each other as Vivek Oberai, Aishwarya Rai, Abhishek Bachchan, and Johnny Lever, and so on. Without anyone's guidance, they are updated in their cinema knowledge. They are even aware of the actors' personal lives and the latest movie releases. The media air is thick with cinema titbits. Gita questions her teacher: "Miss, who come to watch play about children?" (PDD 4) The children are also mindful of the qualities that a hero and heroine should possess. Boys like Suresh and Raju focus on their hero-centric roles as hero worship is practised in India. Girls like Gita and Rajini are more beauty conscious. In order to make true their beauty dreams, they also use some creams and other cosmetics by stealing them from their mistress where they work. Having this cinema-centric mindset, they enact their roles based on Bollywood and rehearse before their teacher's arrival. Shveta first appreciates their histrionic talent and then reveals that they are going to rehearse a play titled *The Pied Piper*.

The children's line of thinking is influenced by Bollywood commercials. When she narrates the outline of the play and says that the children disappear in the end, they guess it is kidnapping and a street child Raju feels that a hero is necessary to save the children and expresses his wish to play the role of a hero. Anthony chips in to create the right mood by singing sad songs like in old films which make the audience cry. Gita says that people don't like a sad ending. Shveta knows that children are less interested in staging the English play, so she tries to woo them by promising them for a movie "Shootout at Lokhandwala" only if they cooperate to rehearse the play. The lame child Anthony has a pre-conceived notion in his mind that a physically challenged boy cannot play a lead role. But Shveta encourages him: "Of course you can be hero! It depends on the script. We can never predict what will work on stage" (PDD 6). The stereotypes portrayed in the movies cultivate negative thoughts in the minds of the children. The dramatist here voices her comments on the pathetic condition of the poor children in Shveta's soliloquy: "Uff! Bollywood-Bollywood-Bollywood. It's taken over their lives. Poor children. They can't think beyond Bollywood! Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan! Their dreams begin and end there" (PDD 6). These children are talented and their aims are high. Their skills are untapped and they lack opportunities to achieve things. Given a chance, their talent will surface. Here the night school is a chance given by the teacher to show their talents and help them lead a better life getting funds from abroad.

Shveta hopes to get a three-year project from England if the children successfully stage the play *The Pied Piper* during the visit of the Eduaid team who have volunteered to sanction the project for the NGO. She hopes that they will grant funds generously for the noble cause. This young spirited teacher envisions the successful result of the project as one that will hit the newspaper headlines: “Slum children – completely uneducated – who didn’t even have ABCD – after six months of English-coaching by us, play Robert Browning’s poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin”!” (PDD 7)

The dramatist voices her comments and ideas through the young teacher Shveta. These slum children, despite their ill-luck to have good education, have latent talents in them and the theatre gives them a glimpse into limitless possibilities of bettering their lives. The author is of the view that the theatre can be a propaganda tool: “Theatre helps children improve their self-esteem. The kids in Nithari village have no means of education and entertainment. They have low self-esteem. Through theatre, we involve them better” (Web). This is what Marwah does in her play. Deepika Nath quotes Anuradha Marwah’s words in her article entitled “Searching for Definitions,” “Our theatre group wants to highlight the plight of this village and voice their concerns” (Web).

Slum children are also like other children who have aspirations in life; they too have aims in life; they too yearn to go to school. People should not have prejudices and pre-conceived notions about them. Keeping aloof the pre-conceptions and misconceptions, if they are approached, people can make this India without socio-economic instability for sure. Professor Higgins in Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* takes up a challenge that he can train a cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, to elevate her to the status of duchess speaking impeccable English. He trains her, makes her sing, and finally brings her to a party as a princess who speaks flawless English. Shveta, like Professor Higgins, trains the slum children with her best to teach English. She believes that her play *The Pied Piper* will be truly magical at the end of the rehearsal. She never bothers about what people say about her for teaching English to slum children. She strongly believes the Pied Piper will kindle their imagination and make them dream outside Bollywood.

The urban middle class discussing the events happening in the host’s sitting room forms part of the common mass. They discuss the lives of slum children thereby exposing their problems and other social issues prevailing in the society. Their conversation starts with the mobile theft which appears a routine for Meenakshi. She warns Manish to be very careful whereas Manish is kind-hearted and often “keeps a packet of sweets to distribute among them” (PDD 8). He doesn’t blame the kid for the robbery but his parents and their poverty-stricken situation. He feels sorry for the child’s pathetic condition and at the same time appreciates his wish to be an Abishek Bachchan. He is of the view that, “They shouldn’t become criminals to support their families. That affects everybody!” (PDD 9) If Nonita’s ten-year-old maid steals today, she might do something else when she is fifteen or twenty; if Raju steals a mobile today, the same child might murder somebody tomorrow. The play is censorious of the rigid India’s socio-economic divide.

Common people form their own opinions about others in their collective memory. The two couples in the play do not think alike. The conversation between the two couples reveals their differing mindsets and varying attitudes. While the host couple sympathizes with the poor children for their pitiable condition and tries to help them, the guest couple has no good opinion about the slum children. Nonita says, “These aren’t normal kids” (PDD 8). Nonita and her husband do not feel any sympathy for them and they regard the children as criminals. Ratish talks in favour of the children, “They would be I suppose if they had a regular upbringing. God knows who the parents are, whether they have parents at all —” (PDD 8).

Shveta’s parents too, like other parents, are not well disposed to her wish as she is young girl who has to settle in life. She needs to take risks to teach at the night school in the slum area which is considered as “breeding place of violence”. Though she sounds impractical to her parents, they appreciate and encourage her good Samaritan efforts. Meenakshi agrees with Shveta that the slum kids are very bright and intelligent but Nonita speaks ill of the slum children and brands them as immoral. She cites her ten-year-old servant maid as an example who, according to her, is over mature in her thinking and that “it’s like having the parody of a whore in the home” (PDD 9). Though she blames the little girl, she is not ready to turn her out as Nonita herself cannot manage her household works. She can’t look after her bedridden father; her mother can’t be left alone even for ten minutes. So Nonita cannot afford to lose the girl, knowing well that she is underage and it amounts to child labour. If any problem arises, the girl’s mother will swear that she is fifteen years. But Meenakshi feels sorry for their condition, “These kids work to support their families. And they grow up too soon as a result! It is a vicious cycle . . .” (PDD 9). Through their discussion, the playwright highlights many contemporary social issues like child labour, poverty, lack of basic amenities, the poor upbringing of the slum children, and so on. These issues are discussed on stage to create awareness among the audience.

The couples suggest that “drastic measures are called for to clean up the city. On the one hand, we talk of making Delhi an international city; on the other hand, we have all this – like pock marks all over” (PDD 9). The characters also take proof from other countries who took immediate action for the betterment of their nation. In Beijing, China government has taken measures for the clearance of slums and now no slums exist. They say, “We too need a government that has the balls to bring about sweeping changes. Remove the slums, put all these budding criminals to work in factories – have a police force that’s tough!” (PDD 9) Change cannot be made over night. “Change has to be gradual. I think we’re slowly moving towards a more egalitarian system. The transitional phase is difficult . . . for everybody . . . us and for them . . .” (PDD 9). The slum children hope and expect that somebody will lend their helping hands to make their dreams come true. The dramatist expresses her suggestion that the “haves” should come forward to help the “have-nots”. Like Bernard Shaw, Marwah takes contemporary social issues that haunt India, discusses them on stage, voices her opinions from the audience point of view and makes her own suggestions.

Society plays a major role in the holistic growth of children and all-round growth of the nation. The playwright reveals the impact of the mass media on the children. They learn many

things from films like how to kidnap, torture, kill and they imitate such things in real life. Anthony, a lame boy says, “Kidnappers don’t give, they take. They take lots of money; they torture” (*PDD* 18). While rehearsing, the teacher asks the children to conceive the image of the Pied Piper. The teacher kindles their imagination and makes them dream beyond their capacity and think original. She wants them to actively imagine fairies and goblins. The lame boy dreams of becoming an athlete to win applause, medals and garlands. Other children also catalogue their dreams one by one and the teacher ensures that the Pied Piper will take them to a wonderland where everything is possible. The children believe that they can enjoy rich life if the Pied Piper takes them away. When the rehearsal comes to an end, it becomes real and the modern Pied Piper abducts the children. The Pied Piper is visible only to the children and the teacher is frozen in a corner without noticing the Pied Piper. Here the real and the unreal coexist.

The middle class, who represent the majority of the population, discuss the Nithari incident, that is, the abduction and serial killing of the slum children, helplessly as impotent critics and soon return to their normal life as if nothing had happened. Through them, the playwright brings up other issues like poverty, the deteriorating law and order, the role of media who wait for sensational news and scoops and remain indifferent to the social injustices, misuse of NGO’s funds and so on. The abduction of the slum children is revealed through the middle class couples. The playwright has used the same locale and same data that happened in the real incident. Forty children were kidnapped, raped, killed, dissected, packed up in a cover and thrown in the drainage nearby. Organ-selling has become a large-scale racket and it has led to mushrooming of cyber forums for illegal sales. For survival, poor people sell their body organs. But cannibals like the Pied Piper in the play sell organs to foreign countries, especially the first world countries and earn huge profit. In an article “Want a Kidney? Just go Online. Price Negotiable” dated 17 June 2013, Serena Josephine observes that “On social networking forums and private sites with message boards, there are hundreds of people interested in selling and buying kidneys” (Web). The play is a satire on Indian society and it satirizes Indian police and judiciary. Nearly “forty children disappeared and the police kept sitting on their fat asses. Does the police ever act in time in this country?” (*PDD* 24) When the first child had gone missing, they must have taken serious action but everything is out of hand now and forty children had disappeared. Those children who had disappeared were the children of the poor migrant workers and so the police blame the parents for their negligence. The servant who has done these serial killings single-handed is a scapegoat. Only the servant has been caught by police but the truth behind this will remain unravelled.

The kidnapper has abducted children five to twenty five years old. It is said that a twenty-year old girl, perhaps a prostitute, was one among the killed. The police can turn any girl into a prostitute. When her parents complain to the police, they just blindly say that their daughter might have run away with her boy friend. This shows the irresponsible behaviour and callousness of the police. At the same time, in this over-populated nation, police cannot be blamed for every mishap. Instead of blaming the police, they could have advised their children to be wary of strangers. Accountability is for both government and parents. Their carelessness led

to the loss of their children. The slum parents are not just irresponsible but also unaccountable for their children's offences. They have readymade answers to the police enquiries.

Shveta is aware that the children are disappearing one by one from the nearby place. She has discussed this with her parents earlier and now the children, her night school students, have disappeared and it traumatized her completely. She also knew that the children's parents were complaining to the police that the children were disappearing from near the water tank adjacent to the big house D5. Members of Nithari and its surroundings have tried some ways to forbid the children from entering that area through public announcements but still they could not control them. The middle class couples say that these deprived children long for clothes, cosmetics and mobile phones which they can't afford them. So they are easily tempted to go astray.

Finally the couples wind up their discussion saying that the case is handled by the CBI and the guilty will be punished and in the end they go back to their routine life. The majority of the people expose their intellectual helplessness and stop with verbal criticisms. The modern Pied Piper as a fantasy figure in the play is the Pied Piper of Delhi. Surreptitiously, he had been following her daily and finally he appeared on the stage and abducted the children. The fact and the fiction seamlessly merge when this unidentified Pied Piper of today abducts the slum children when the rehearsal is almost over. The teacher is taken aback and could not believe her own eyes. The audiences are at their wits' end and in a state of utter disbelief like Shveta when the rehearsal evolves into a reprisal of the real Noida tragedy. She still believes that the children haven't arrived at night school and waits for them. She feels guilty for she has also become a reason for the death of the children. She is psychologically affected and caught in a mental turbulence. Seeing Anthony, the lame boy singing the part of the poem with correct diction, she encourages him for his perfect pronunciation and diction.

Under the very eyes of Shveta, the children are hypnotized and kidnapped by the Pied Piper. This symbolically states that however the society is vigilant, criminals outsmart. She wonders whether it is a dream or reality: "It's the Pied Piper. He's come . . . He's come out of the poem" (*PDD* 29). These lines testify her mental instability and chaotic mind. Journalists pester with their questions but she sticks to the same reply that the piper exists only in Browning's poem and is not real. The Pied Piper handcuffed tries to lure the policemen by blowing the pipe. Journalists attribute various terms to his abnormality:

Journalist 1: . . . He must've lured them away.

Journalist 2: Raped them

Journalist 3: Eaten their flesh

Journalist 1: He's got necrophilia

Journalist 2: Pedophilia

Journalist 3: Schizophrenia. (*PDD* 30)

Journalists also raise another contemporary issue to the teacher whether Shveta agrees with the human rights lobby in pardoning the Pied Piper and whether capital punishment should be done away with. So this is a raging controversy in today's India, engaging both the Executive and the Judiciary. But the teacher, who has not recovered her normalcy, sticks to her view that the real

Pied Piper does not exist. She even starts to cry and pleads with the police to look for the children. She thinks that all of them have betrayed the children and their wishes are not fulfilled. Their dreams have not come true and it remains a pipe dream. Shveta is hoping against the hope for the resurrection of the children. In her confused state of affairs, she refuses to believe the truth.

Journalists continue to pose questions as to whether CIA's and NGO's are involved in this incident; whether NGO's fund does more good; and if NGO's funds should become transparent under Right to Information. Journalists often overreact to sensational news and are waiting for scooping. Their worry about the children's death is much less than their interest in covering the incident as a selling proposition. The Pied Piper is dragged to the gallows, where he dances on the stool before the noose falls down on his neck. The hanged Pied Piper is being taken away on a stretcher by the police but he jumps and begins to dance again. Again he is arrested, dragged to the gallows and the noose is being prepared again. His revival symbolically warns that such incidents will continue to happen and criminals like him will continue to involve in such activities. The lame boy Anthony symbolically represents the lame India which is limping towards progress very slowly. The playwright has ended the play cautioning the people to be aware of such hidden anti-social elements.

Anuradha Marwah has written this play with a social commitment. It brings to light the deliberately hidden tears of the Indian social fabric shunned behind the mask of shining India. She uses Browning's poem as a metaphor to expose the social maladies of contemporary India afflicted by apathy and indifference on the part of majority Indians. Like, Adiga's *The White Tiger*, it also serves as an exposè of the evils lurking in the Indian soil.

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