

Amanuddin's Allegories: A Study of His Short Plays

Basavaraj Naikar

Professor & Chairman

Department of English

Karnatak University

Dharwad 580 003

Though Amanuddin (1934-1989) is primarily known as a poet, he has recently turned his attention to play writing also. He has already published a slim volume of three plays entitled *System Shaker and Other Plays*, which is followed by a full-length play, *The King Who Sold His Wife*. The present article is intended to highlight his short plays so that later a comprehensive critical appreciation of Amanuddin's total literary output can be made possible. A study of his short plays may help the reader to see similarities and dissimilarities between his drama and poetry and understand the writer's total vision of life.

Amanuddin is an expatriate Indian-English writer, whose American citizenship naturally separates him from the Indian soil. Although an Indian at heart, Amanuddin is compelled by the exigencies of life to stay in America and is therefore affected by the American life.

His literary sensibility is coloured if not conditioned by American life, which provides the immediate background to his writing. Like all successful writers, Amanuddin also has to achieved universality only through the concrete picture of a life which is time and-space-bound. Therefore, Amanuddin, like a sensitive musical instrument, has to respond to the life around him, record the experience and express it in literary terms. His plays amply testify to this phenomenon. In his short plays *System Shaker*, *Flower Child* and *Doomsday* one may see the American background. The problems dealt with therein are not indigenous to America or to India or to any single community, race or nation, but are common to entire mankind or the twentieth century world. He deals neither with mythological problems (as T. P. Kailasam does), nor with typical Indian problems (as Asif Currimbhoy does), nor with

symbolically presented problems (as Rabindranath Tagore does), nor with religious problems (as Harindranath Chattopadhyaya does). Amanuddin's concern with the universal problems, in spite of their American background contradistinguishes him from the other Indian-English playwrights.

Amanuddin's short plays may be described as modern allegories or satires on twentieth century life in general. Although his themes are apparently concerned with American problems, they embrace the whole world in their universality. In fact, they are the common problems of the twentieth century nations, because the entire world is affected by the American life in one way or the other on account of the dependence of other nations on America. Amanuddin, who is impelled to observe and respond to the American life around him, naturally feels concerned about humanity in general because of the far-reaching consequences of the same on the life of the other countries also. The evils of American society make Amanuddin think of the evils of human life in general. He grows apprehensive of the hazardous consequences of such evils. He is, therefore, forced to think of a possibility of finding solutions to such problems. Dissatisfied as he is with these evils of American (hence human) life, Amanuddin has chosen to express his dissatisfaction

through the allegorical form of drama, because of his inclination towards the general and impersonal way of thinking and feeling.

Amanuddin's short plays may be described as dramatic satires attacking the evils of life by discussing them on a stage. The generality of the issues selected by him affects his characterization also. The themes thus demand a particular technique suitable for the expression of the same. Amanuddin's conception of character is, therefore, general and universal rather than idiosyncratic and narrowly local. It is on account of the tendency for the romantic and therefore universal thinking and feeling that he is led to follow the technique of allegory in dramatizing his vision of life. Himself a romantic poet, Amanuddin cannot help thinking in terms of large entities like a society or a group or a type. It is because of the generality of his characterization that his plays assume the allegorical form.

What then is an allegory? "Allegory," according to the *New Webster's Dictionary* is "a figurative discourse in which the principal subject is depicted by another subject resembling it in its properties and circumstances: a symbolic representation; a narrative in which abstract ideas are personified; a sustained metaphor."¹ Amanuddin achieves the generality of theme by following the

allegorical technique. The characters in his plays are not the individuals, who have their own idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. On the contrary, they are invariably certain types representing certain class or section of the society. The characters like Visionary, Scientist, Bluecollar, Man and Woman etc. represent the religious, the scientific, the social, and the sexual division of the society and the concomittant joys and sorrows, responsibilities, fears, ideals and dilemmas. In this regard, the characters of Amanuddin easily remind us of those of the *Moralities* of medieval England, the allegories of John Bunyan and the masques of Ben Jonson. Thus allegory becomes the vehicle of Amanuddin's dramatization of the dilemmas of the modern man.

The first play, *System Shaker* is an attack on the paralyzed nature of the modern education, which with its exaggerated emphasis on the intellectual development of the student disqualifies him for any kind of physical progress or achievement. Amanuddin satirizes the one-sidedness of the modern education, which renders the student unfit for the society. The economic imbalance between supply and demand aggravates the situation, because modern education with its intellectual bias takes away all the adjustability from the student. Although Amanuddin has chosen the theme of the

American student, the modern reader can easily understand that the American student may as well represent the student of the other countries. Every nation has got to undergo that stage in its history. *System Shaker* consists of four characters: Bill, Jane, Bluecollar and Businessman. It depicts the dilemmas of the modern American student, Bill, who is the product of the mass education. Bill has at last earned his highest academic degree i.e. *Doctor of Philosophy*. Amanuddin has a dig at the modern society, where the certificate is more important than the individual himself. It is because of this kind of recognition in the academic world that Mr. William Mulder wanted to be Dr. William Mulder. For the sake of earning the paper qualification he spent "six years of hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares, busy summers, books, papers, carbons, typewriter, and all those stupid requirements, courses, languages, qualifying dissertation and orals" (p.6). Now that he has acquired the degree, he has been able to overcome his inferiority complex. Without a Ph. D., Bill was insulted in all the academic circles. He has not forgotten the humiliation that he had to suffer at the hands of the committee chairman. "And that son-of-a-bitch my committee chairman even said I wasn't a Ph. D. material as if I were some useless inanimate thing" (p.6). But after getting the

paper qualification Dr. William Mulder, paradoxically enough, feels disillusioned with himself. Far from attaining any security he continues to experience more and more insecurity. Now the greatest problem for him has been that of being accepted in life. The disadvantages of the extreme specialization in some branch of knowledge make him not only a misfit but a worthless fellow also. That is because there is no market for his talents. A student of English literature, Dr. William Mulder fails to get the job of a teacher. He is, therefore, baffled by the lack of demand and recognition for his literary knowledge. He is rejected by Bluecollar, who points out the one-sided life of the intellectuals, who love philosophy, as they have no guts to do anything else. Bluecollar flings insulting remarks into his face, "I ain't interested in no philosophy that kind a stuff, man" (p.7). He even shows the relative worthlessness of intellectual achievement as contrasted with the importance and desirability of physical achievement by saying, " ... I got muscles, man-real muscle. You ain't got none either" (P.7). Likewise, the doctor of philosophy is rejected by Businessman, who, in spite of his admiration for earned PhDs, cannot attach much importance to them. Businessman points out the disadvantages of studying and practising poetry, which makes people oversensitive

to things and to that extent inactive also. Dr. William Mulder fails to get a job in the library, as he does not have a B Lib. Sc. degree. As he is a man, the female chauvinists keen on fighting the male chauvinistic pigs, prevent him from getting a job in the library. Dr. Mulder's cumulative realization of his unfitness in the world churns his soul and he almost has an identity crisis. That is why he bursts out, "What I want is not an equal opportunity - just an opportunity to use myself, my knowledge, my talents. But what do I get, insults, humiliations and more than all this, hunger (p. 13). His words obviously, reveal the lack of genuine interest on the part of the people in knowledge and experience. The utter futility of higher education in America symbolized by Bill's life holds true in the case of other democratic countries also. The present social set-up is such that there is really no balance between the number of students trained and the job opportunities. At last Bill is killed in a bomb explosion. *System Shaker* offers a picture of the tragedy of the modern educated youth. The play can be interpreted as a satire on the modern society, which produces misfits in large numbers by giving them one-sided education. As Amanuddin says in his letter to the present writer, "Academic values that is, values now encouraged by today's education are farcical and even stupid.

System Shaker is about a Ph. D. in English, who is actually unfit for the job of a janitor. Modern education and wisdom are not related in any sense despite the pretensions of the educators to the contrary. The true essential human being is missing from the academic scene because nobody cares for him. To be oneself and to be able to realize one's own intellectual and spiritual potential is no longer the aim of higher education either in India or America" (Letter: Amanuddin to Naikar P.1).

Flower Child is a lyrical play, which holds mirror to the tendency of the modern man to dissociate pleasure from responsibility, a constant theme in the western literature of the twentieth century. It easily reminds us of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* wherein the society lady feeds on pills to maintain her slimness and retain her husband's interest in her. The present play consists of only three characters: Man, Woman and an unwanted Child. Child is the result of the lust between Man and Woman on the beach. Child, in conformity with the laws of growth, comes to have "sudden consciousness of I am" (p. 18). Woman, who is more attached to the child than Man is, comes to accept the child as the logical consequence of the lusty night. But Man hesitates to accept it as his own, because he has serious doubts about the identity of the child's father. This

situation recalls to our mind the hero of Strindberg's tragedy, *Father* wherein the hero, unable to prove his fatherhood of his wife's child, resorts to suicide. In *Flower Child*, Man has failed to accept the inevitable consequences of his lust. He thinks that Woman has "created a barrier" (p.20). But Woman has the humanity and the guts to accept the responsibility consequent upon her indulgence in lust. Through this allegory, Amanuddin satirizes the modern society, which creates a number of problems by allowing free sex. With the growing dissolution of the institution of marriage, both men and women have to face their own peculiar problems. Since both of them are involved in fornication none of them can be singly culpable. Each may, therefore, accuse the other, though in vain. Man's awareness of Woman's accessibility to a multiplicity of men and of the devil of a pill for her constant companion make him doubt his own likelihood of being the father of the child of his beloved. He never hesitates to express his doubt frankly. He accuses her, with so many men in your life and your constant companion you cannot burden me with a child that came unplanned unannounced (p.21).

But Woman becomes an embodiment of the responsibility of life. She asks him not to run away from reality.

She teaches him the lesson of facing the challenge of life with courage and confidence. She laments over Man's exclusive interest in the female body and his inability to cultivate the higher values of life. She points out that man, far from rising to any sort of spiritual height, continues to indulge in the mechanical repetition of the stereotyped sexual act. She rightly accuses him,

only women have a place in your life because they have holes you want to play with they can feed your ego as they pull your rod of divinity every night and you lie on them chewing their bulging breasts but when nature asserts itself and demands fatherhood from you shout to your victim mothers and children have no place in your life the same old game men have been playing for centuries (p.22).

The play is obviously a satire on the modern society, which is characterized by the replacement of the matrimonial discipline by the extravagant sexual liberty. The allegorical nature of the characters naturally gives them a touch of universality. Therefore Man and Woman stand not only for the American man and the American woman but also for the modern man and the modern woman, although they are the products of the immediate context of American

civilization. The language of the play is marked by a frankness that is indigenous to the twentieth century literature. It is likely to shock the puritanical reader. In Amanuddin's words, *Flower Child* is both realistic and dreamlike play and the poetic element adds to its dreamlike quality." (Letter: Amanuddin to Naikar, p.2).

Doomsday is a short play, which deals with the conflict between science and religion in the modern world. It consists of only three characters and depicts the two ways of life at loggerheads with each other. Both the scientist and the visionary have been suffering from curses. The Scientist, though tied down to time and space has the privilege of indulging in concrete actions, is, by the very logic of his profession, led to create the weapons like bombs, which can wipe out the entire humanity from the face of the earth. The Visionary, though afflicted with the imaginary fears and delusions, has the advantage of the possession of the foreknowledge of the world's doomsday. Whereas the Scientist believes in the 'power, of knowledge, the Visionary dreads the 'dangers' of knowledge. Each curses the other of the peculiar disadvantages that he is professionally beset with. The Scientist thinks that he, with the he with the help of his instruments and his subtle knowledge of the universe,

can control the world. He thinks he can overcome any difficulty that he comes across. He is too fanatical and foolish to recognize the mystery of the universe. His over trust in his brain is made to look ridiculous. The Visionary shows the utter insignificance of man in the evolution of the world, " ... suppose you are fed to whale or a tiger do you think the creature would become either intelligent or stupid by eating you? You nourish him for a brief moment and then are thrown out of his body-yet you imagine you are the peak of perfection in the evolutionary ladder" (p.27). Whereas the Scientist believes in the supremacy of logic and insists upon the 'clear terms', the Visionary pleads for the shortcut of supra-reason to the knowledge of truth. Meanwhile the Scientist's wife in an attempt to prevent the Visionary from being killed by her husband knocks the latter to death. But a sense of fear overwhelms the Visionary and the Scientist's widow. At last they realize that nothing can save them except love and that love can compensate for all the human cruelty, selfishness and wickedness. The allegorical nature of these characters universalizes the common problems of man born out of the American context.

Amanuddin's short plays read like twentieth century moralities through which he not only satirizes the futility of education, the escape from matrimonial

responsibility and the destructive nature of the modern man in power etc. but also suggests his own positive answers to the problems. The plays, therefore, tend to be discursive in spite of their poetic atmosphere. They show the conflict between different philosophies of life. Many times the characters act as the author's mouthpieces and the plays, therefore tend towards the allegorical drama. In his plays 'Quest for the ultimates of life and the world is a persisting theme.' (Letter: Amanuddin to Naikar, P.I). In them we have a perpetual conflict between two sets of values i.e. reality and ideal; between production and need; between pleasure and responsibility; and between the rational and the supra-rational etc. Man is inevitably torn between these polarities. Amanuddin's drift of thought is towards the real tinged with the ideal. And that is what is suggested in these short plays. He wants the modern man to be neither completely dull and drab nor entirely airy and moony. Man, according to him should endeavour to bridge the two worlds of reality and ideal with a stress on the real. "As a writer," says Amanuddin, "I am a romantic realist and not a romantic idealist, who prefers to be always in the dream world." (Letter: Amanuddin to Naikar, p.2).

The lengthy dialogues may not be very congenial for the stage. That has to be

tested in the Indian or the American theatre. The lyrical quality of the plays makes them probably suited more to the radio and television than to the stage. We may, in future, expect a more complex and varied drama from Amanuddin's pen as these short plays indicate.

REFERENCES:

1. *New Webster's Dictionary*, College Edition, Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 1982, p. 44
2. Amanuddin, Sayed, *System Shaker and Other Plays*, Sumter, S.C. (U.S.A.); Poetry East West Publications. 1972. (All the subsequent page references are to this edition.)