

**The Simulated World Of Genet:
Hegemony Of Hyperreality In *The Balcony*****Niladri Mahapatra**M.A. (English), 4th Semester
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This Paper is an attempt at analyzing the celebrated play *The Balcony* (1956) of Jean Genet from the perspective of Jean Baudrillard's concept of 'Hyperreality'. Baudrillard's celebrated treatise *simulacra and Simulation* (1981) proposed a revolutionary way of perceiving reality. It seeks to interrogate the relation between reality, symbols, society and hyperreality in the prism of technological developments of the Twentieth Century. And, this concept is superbly reverberated in the drama *The Balcony* by Jean Genet. In this play, fantasy dances upon the senses of reality; and reality, for all the characters as well as audiences, becomes more elusive and slippery. As the Baudrillard's simulated world is associated with what is usually known as 'the loss of reality' and thus becomes hyperreal, the world of this Genet's play also reflects that loss of reality and becomes hyperreal. The brothel, which is called as 'the house of illusions', is designed by the simulated nature of reality and it favors the clients to play their fake characters like Bishop, Judge, General, and Beggar. Thus, the brothel becomes an imaginary place but we want to believe it as a real place; thus it becomes hyperreal like the Disneyland. Even, characters are very tenuous and unsure, and are never able to find their feet on the ground of reality rather they find their existence in the fantasies and become the member of the world of hyperreality. Finally, hyperreality behooves the sui-generis of the play by dominating the actual reality.

Keywords- Hyperreality, Simulacra, Simulation, Illusion, Fantasy, Reality.

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In *Naturalis Historia* (77-79 AD), Gaius Plinius Secundus, discussed a painting contest between Zeuxis and his contemporary Parrhasius, the two greatest painters of 5th Century BC, to determine who is the greatest artist. When Zeuxis unveiled his painting of grapes, they appeared so real that birds flew down to peck at them. But when Parrhasius, whose painting was concealed behind a curtain, asked Zeuxis to pull aside that curtain, the curtain itself turned out to be a painted illusion. Parrhasius won, and Zeuxis said that he has deceived the birds, but Parrhasius had deceived Zeuxis. Analogous stories occur in the realm of literature. When sir Thomas More's *Utopia* was published in the 16th Century, a priest asked his Bishop to send him to Utopia (Utopia is a fictional island – its name in Greek means “no place”- but the characters in the book share their names with real people and so perhaps are real, and one describes his visit to Utopia). Again on his death bed Balzac, a renowned French novelist and playwright, called for Dr. Bianchon, one of his fictional creations. All the above stories, very diaphanously, reverberate that one of the traditional hallmarks of successful art is that people take it for real and they make themselves baffled by believing in the absolute fake or absolute unreality which serves a perfect illustration of ‘hyperreality’. Now, this particular term ‘hyperreality’ is a very pivotal postmodernist term which means – an inability of consciousness to segregate reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced Postmodern societies. Hyperreality is seen as a condition in which what is real and what is unreal are seamlessly jumbled together. The concept of hyperreality was contentiously coined by Jean Baudrillard in his remarkable work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) in which he seeks to examine the relationships among reality, symbols, and society. Postmodern culture, according to Baudrillard, is characterised by the simulated nature of reality; it is associated with what is usually known as “the loss of the real which is the view that in the contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, T.V, and advertising had led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of hyperreality.”(*Beginning Theory*, 64) The real is no longer what existed prior to its representations, but is in fact preceded by a process through which signs and images are made over into ‘simulacra’. Baudrillard names this process ‘simulation’, although the term is also used synonymously with ‘simulacrum’ (and its plural ‘simulacra’).

The Latin word ‘simulacra’ means a representation or imitation of a person or thing and it has long been of interest to philosophers like Plato. In his book *Sophist*, Plato speaks of two

kinds of simulacrum or image making – the first is a faithful reproduction, attempted to copy precisely the original. The second is intentionally distorted in order to make the copy appear correct to viewers. But, Postmodernist French Social theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right; the ‘hyperreal’. According to Baudrillard, simulation is the implantation of signs of the real for the real. His work *Simulacra and Simulation* breaks the sign-order into four stages –

- The first stage is called “the sacramental order”. In this the sign is a faithful reflection of the reality. Baudrillard calls it ‘a reflection of profound reality’.
- In the second stage there is a perversion of reality by the sign.
- The third stage masks the absence of a profound reality, where the sign pretends to be a faithful copy, but it is a copy with no original.
- The fourth stage is pure simulation, in which the simulacrum has no relationship to any reality whatsoever.

Thus, Baudrillard defined that through this process unreal or fake becomes more real than the reality.

Both Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard refer to ‘Disneyland’ as an example of hyperreality. In the book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard said that – Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the pirates, the Frontier, the Future world etc. Umberto Eco believes that Disneyland with its settings such as Main Street and full sized houses has been created to look absolutely realistic, taking visitors' imagination to a fantastic past. This false reality creates an illusion and makes it more desirable for people to buy this reality. Disneyland works in a system that enables visitors to feel that technology and the created atmosphere can give us more reality than nature can. It gratifies our illusions or daydream fantasies in real life. That is why, we are gravitated by it.

On the other hand, Baudrillard argues that the ‘imaginary world’ of Disneyland magnetizes people inside and has been presented as ‘imaginary’ to make people believe that all its surroundings are ‘real’. But he believes that the Los Angeles area is not real; thus it is hyperreal. Disneyland is a set of apparatuses which tries to bring imagination and fiction to what is called ‘real’. In a word, Disneyland has the effect of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principal.

Now, in the following pages, I will discuss that how Baudrillard’s theory will be applicable in the drama *The Balcony* by Jean Genet. *The Balcony* is a play in which the dramatist deploys a simulated world where the play of illusions and fantasies proliferate and become more real than the reality. However, there is no more clear-cut borderline between truth and imagination but a dissemination of a mixture of reality and illusion. The brothel patrons take on elevated positions in role-playing games, but the line between illusion and reality starts to blur.

20th Century is believed to be the epoch-making era in French Literature because it boasts for several prolific dramatists among whom the name of Jean Genet (1910 – 1986) is oft-remembered. Jean Genet has been venerated as a novelist, playwright, poet, essayist, political activist and a convicted felon. Like a raucous Lucifer in his tenebrous world, Jean Genet negates the fundamental oppositions between reality and illusion, good and evil, with the force of a dramatist and a moralist. He was born in Paris on 19 December 1910. He was abandoned by his mother and brought up by peasant foster parents in the Morvan, in the North of the Massif central. When he reached the age of twenty one, he was given his birth certificate. From it he learned that his mother had been called Gabrielle Genet and that he had been born at 22 Rue d'Assas, behind the Luxembourg Gardens. When he went to find the house, he discovered it was a maternity hospital. And after that he became the denizens of a dark world. Thief, homosexual, traitor were forms by which he defined the self in contrast to the world, but obviously in complicity with the world's own definitions. Jean Genet in his book *The Thief's Journal* (1949) wrote that – “Abandoned by my family, I found it natural to aggravate this fact by the love of males, and that love by stealing, and stealing by crime, or complicity with crime. Thus I decisively repudiated a world that had repudiated me.” (qtd. in *The Theatre Of The Absurd*, 123) Genet transforms his life of shame by acts of imagination, by incantations which he attributes to the small boy's dreams of royal splendours. Genet transmutes the sense of loss into a sense of creation. With this metamorphosis the criminal reveals himself as a moralist. Genet recognised that the criminal had become a poet and the poet went on to become a dramatist.

Jean Genet's work has left a powerful legacy to post-modernity. Genet's fidelity, simultaneous criticism and participation in radical politics, his obsession with role-playing and identity, and his stylized and obscenity anticipate postmodern apprehensions and techniques. In his book *The Theatre Of The Absurd* (1961), Martin Esslin was so loquacious to say that – “His plays are concerned with expressing his own feeling of helplessness and solitude when confronted with the despair and loneliness of man caught in the hall of mirrors of the human condition, inexorably trapped by an endless progression of images that are merely his own distorted reflection - lies covering lies, fantasies battenning upon fantasies, nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares.” (122) So, being a denizen of a dark world, Genet saw the real world as a world of illusion. That is why, Martin Esslin also said that – Genet “tries to make his fantasy penetrate into the reality of the world.” (*The Theatre Of The Absurd*, 130) And this particular word ‘illusion or fantasy’ became the fulcrum of his theatre as it is superbly reflected in *The Balcony*. For this, in 1962, Genet himself suggested that the play is should be performed as a glorification of the image and the reflection.

The Balcony (in French *Le Balcon* – 1956) is considered by many to be Jean Genet's masterpiece, though it was written after he said he would give up writing plays together. Like many of Genet's work, the play was inspired by Genet's forte of theatrical illusions which deal with topics such as sex, prostitution, politics and revolution. Set inside a brothel where common men play men of power in their sexual fantasies, reality and illusion feed off each other in this difficult play. Here, dreams make reality tolerable and when they come true, as the customers are forced to live the roles they play, unreal becomes more real. Most of the action takes place in an upmarket brothel in which its madam, Irma, casts, directs, and coordinates performances in a

house of infinite mirrors and theatres. Genet uses this setting to explore roles of power in society; in the first few scenes patrons assume the roles of a bishop who forgives a penitent, a judge who punishes a thief, and a general who rides his horse. Meanwhile, a revolution is progressing outside in the city and suddenly, an Envoy from the Queen arrives and reveals that the pillars of society (the Chief Justice, the Bishop, the General, etc.) have all been killed in the uprising. Using the costumes and props in Irma's "house of illusions" (the traditional French name for a brothel), the patrons' roles are realised when they pose in public as the figures of authority in a counter-revolutionary effort to restore order.

In the fantasy world of the brothel role-playing, as a theatrical device, reveals that the 'real' world is a facade. The house provides them with elaborate props for their fantasies, special rooms, costumes, female accomplices. That is why, Madam Irma, the proprietor, refuses to call her house a brothel rather she says that –

“The Grand Balcony has a world-wide reputation.

It's the most artful, yet the most decent house of illusions.” (34)

As part of the fantasy world we meet four clients playing different roles in succession – that of the Bishop, the Judge, the General, and the Beggar. These characters are known by the roles they play. They take delight in the role and yet they 'abase' their role. The unreal world of brothel with its all designs, costumes, props and prostitutes forces the clients to believe that their characters are real. That is why, Christopher Innes was too glib to say that - in Genet's world “the usual equation between appearance and essence has been reversed. The artificial appearance is the essence.” (*Avant Garde Theatre*, 108) Thus the clients gain a sense of completeness through masquerade. Herein, Baudrillard's first stage of simulacra is shown which is called as 'the sacramental order'. In this stage, sign is a faithful reflection of reality; similarly, the camouflage roles of the clients become a faithful reflection of real characters. And by doing this, the clients pervert the reality which is the second stage of simulacra where reality is perverted by sign.

As the focus shifts from the clients to the organizer of this fantasy world, one gets an insight of Madame Irma. Irma, the madam of the Brothel, the organizer of the enterprise, operates in a realm where she has created her own power relationships, feeding into the fantasies of her customers, and simultaneously interpellating the minds of her prostitutes. It is necessary for her to stratify them into fixed subject positions where they feel convinced that they are happy and better off than the denizens of the real world. For this reason, she suppresses Carmen, a prostitute of the whore house, to meet her daughter by insisting on the impossibility of reaching the world outside –

IRMA: “Are you still set on going to see her? Don't be fool...” (30)

Thus, the brothel or 'the house of illusion' is characterised by the simulated nature of reality; it is associated with what is usually known as 'the loss of the reality'. The brothel helps the clients to simulate the real characters like Bishop, Judge, General and the Beggar in the fantasy world of brothel. Thus the brothel becomes a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra like the Disneyland as Baudrillard defined it. The imaginary world of the brothel attracts the people inside and has been unreal to make people believe that all its surroundings are real. Like the Disneyland, the brothel has the effect of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real. Even,

all the scenario of the brothel, the studios, the costumes, the props, the prostitutes in general and Madame Irma in particular are engaged to manage the brothel as a simulated world of fantasy. Thus, we see here the third stage of simulacra where the brothel conceals the absence of a profound reality like the Disneyland.

The moral barb of the drama is exposed when the two worlds, real and unreal, of the play meet, when the real revolution whose sounds are heard during the beginning of the play requires a command performance of the would- be Bishop, General, Judge. A revolution is happening in the street and the royal palace of queen is blown up and her court swept away by the revolutionaries. An envoy from the palace appears at the brothel and says that the state authorities devise a plan that gives the clients of the brothel to enact their roles in real life as – Bishop, Judge, Beggar. Irma is now the Queen and, together with the other clients, they parade on the Grand Balcony to control the revolution.

Thus, the revolution has been defeated. The revolutionaries are befooled by seeing all the fake characters of the brothel because the unreal becomes more real than the real at this point; and this is the most striking point of the drama which reflects the concept of ‘hyperreality’ of Baudrillard. In this point, the fourth stage of simulacra is exhibited which indicates a pure simulation, in which the simulacrum has no relationship with the reality because it becomes hyperreal. The drama mocks at society that considers ‘to be’ more important than ‘to do’. The image of Queen is more important than who the Queen is. Thus, the characters of the ‘house of illusions’ becomes hyperreal because they create an inability of consciousness in the mind of revolutionaries as well as audiences to distinguish them from the reality. Italian author Umberto Eco explores the notion of hyperreality further by suggesting that the action of hyperreality is to desire reality and in the attempt to achieve that desire, to fabricate a false reality that is to be consumed as real. The people of the revolution desire the simulated characters as the real characters and make them hyperreal characters. Thus, the hyperreality starts to dominate the reality in the drama *The Balcony* and illustrates Genet’s status as a brilliant postmodern dramatist. However, when the drama *The Balcony* was performed in the Richard Schechner’s production, the director astounded the audiences by its evasive technique as Jean Genet used in the drama. As the audience enters the theatre space, they see actors are getting ready for the show, fixing their hair and dressing. On one level of reality, the cast is getting ready to perform a play, but on another level the characters in the play are getting ready to entertain clients of a high-toned brothel. This two level reality is what makes this production so outstanding.

Last but not least, there is not an iota of doubt to convey that Genet’s play *The Balcony* subtly erases the line between spectator and actor, and the spectator is involved in the play to the same extent that the play is involved in reality: they are similarly uncertain, or, to say it in another way, both partake of a measure of illusion or appearance. His theatre, and especially *The Balcony*, reaches the highest level of illusion through the techniques of play within play, and illusion of hyperreality. He wants his fancies, at two or three removes from reality, to reveal themselves in their nothingness. In this pyramid of fantasies, the ultimate appearance destroys the reality of all others. Thus, by holding a mirror to the world, Genet plays with it as hyperreality plays with the real world. Therefore, it is apropos to say that though Genet’s *The Balcony* is a Modern text but it explores the concept of ‘hyperreality’ very emphatically and

moulds a stage where we operate in the arena of Postmodernist tussle between the following dichotomies – the real and the illusive, authentic and fake.

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