



Religious Institutions – A Boon or a Bane? - A Special Reference to John Patrick Shanley's *doubt*

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KEYWORDS

Politicians, religious authorities and social activists make a hue and cry over the sexual harassment and the sexual assault taking place everywhere and every second against children irrespective of gender and age especially in religious, educational and professional institutions which are trusted to be the most sacred and the safest places for the young innocent kids. As the so-called reformers themselves are the actual perpetrators, they exhibit an extreme superficial involvement and create a make-believe demeanour of curbing and driving away such social evils. Similarly, the deep-rooted corruption, perversion, fanaticism and atrocity that exist in the police administration, judicial process and religious institutions expose them as the birth-places of such unimaginable and never-racking crimes. Subsequently, these systems collectively or individually try to choke and suppress the voice of the victims, their family members and even their strong supporters. They indulge in such shameless activities by posing themselves as absolutely sin-free, too benevolent and highly generous and magnanimous people. The hierarchy structure maintained in such organisations also facilitates the offenders to escape tactfully from the impending prosecution and immediate punishment and shame.

The paedophile priests who appeared as too charismatic and benignant enjoyed an uninterrupted freedom and pleasures of life in the Catholic institutions of America in 1960s and they unashamedly and impenitently considered their unlawful act as the basic and essential qualification for their future career advancement in their respective fields. It is quite obvious that the hierarchy structure created for their enjoyment and escape acts as a sceptre to threaten and silence both the children and the nuns studying and serving under them. In addition, it authoritatively liberates the persecutors from and detection and prosecution. Above all, these power-mongers cleverly avoid participation in any democratic decision-making in fear of getting caught hold red-handedly. Hence, the bishops as well as the priests stand together to prevent the suppressed from vocalizing the insult, humiliation and injustice done to them. The network of betrayals among the culprits within and across the religious institutions incubates and promotes their sexual desires and as a result, their unforgivable crime goes unnoticed and uncared. Their vile assignation is otherwise known as an organised paedophilia as the line between complicity and conspiracy is uncertain and unpredictable. Lack of basic love, protection, care, financial support and space at their homeless home force the children particularly the children of African race become vulnerable and fall prey to the repetitive sexual harassments of the superiors under whom they struggle hard to mould their future on losing their precious present along with numberless pleasures of life. What is so regrettable about it is that the exploitation and injustice meted out by the children are very much accepted by their family members as they deem it as a tool of recognition and a viable means for their successful future. Even if their allegations against those criminals could be proved with ample evidences, the oppressors in power would cleverly suppress and dismiss them all as baseless and meaningless. As John Patrick Shanley, the award-winning American playwright has once been one of the inmates of such Catholic institutions is able to voice out

the real experiences of the sufferers in his *Doubt*.

The parochial, nay, the patriarchal system existed in St. Nicholas Catholic School of Bronx, New York. It functioned solely under the authority of Roman Catholic Institutions of the United States in 1960s. The system ultimately transformed and disfigured the aforesaid educational institution as the centre of paedophilia, power crisis, racial and gender discrimination, etc. Thus, the religious institution acts not only as a threat to the African school-going children and the nuns in school there but also a bane to them as it lands them in all sorts of humiliation and trouble.

John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* unmask how the Roman Catholic Institutions have long been the abodes of all the nameless vices that sever and mutilate the innocent minds of their inmates. Sister Aloysius who is the strong supporter of the conservative system of education suspects and questions each and every teacher and student in addition to questioning their teaching-learning process. As she nourishes an extreme animosity towards art-subjects and history and dance classes, she ignores them as a waste of time. She is also quite against implementing the innovative and psychological approaches involved in pedagogy. Though she is very much conscious of the existence of the gender discrimination, the biased hierarchy structure and the connivance of the higher authorities, she openly and determinedly resists the male hypocrisy and manipulation in general but against Father Flynn, the dubious priest, in particular. She is a puissant and an insistent caviller of the priest's follies and failures and hence, she tries to unravel the mystery that lurks behind the estranged relationship that he has been maintaining with the only African student, Donald Muller of eighth grade. It is to be understood that the boy is neither young nor old to decipher the adult world which is absolutely filled with filth, conspiracy, hypocrisy, superficiality and mean-mentality.

Both the young and the agile instructors namely Sister James and Sister Aloysius acted upon and act in a sterile male world to prove the vile and vicious act of Father Flynn and his other indirect associates who in absentia facilitate and accommodate the criminal to escape from the purview and punishment of the higher authorities. Yet, it is paradoxically the women who suffer most as they are the most oppressed ones other than the child victim, Donald Muller and his mother. However, these women are portrayed as the most effective tools of Shanley's brilliant inquisition of male self-aggrandizement of his agenda of contemporary social and spiritual separation. Being the figures of an oppressed female selfhood and elements of a male critique, these women including Donald's mother and her son occupy only a unique split space in the play. Even in Mrs Donald Muller's silence against the injustice done to her son, there lies only a spirit of resilience and tolerance which cares nothing except her son's elevation to a higher plane of life. Hence, she goes to the extent of justifying the sin committed by the priest against her son as a good sign for his bright future. Therefore, she says, "My son needs some man to care about him and see him through to what he wants to go. And thank God, this educated man with

some kindness in him wants to do just that" (D 49). Mrs Donald Muller is not a fool and a coward to accept the injustice done to her son. Her whole generation has undergone such discrimination and humiliation before and still it undergoes this kind of shameful experiences under the white race in all the ways possible. She is very much conscious of her powerlessness in front of the man in white gown. Even when Sister Aloysius persuades Donald's mother to raise her voice against the oppressor, she says, "... You're not going against noman in a robe and win, Sister. He's got the position" (D 47). She openly admits that her son's wretched life is destined only by God and He alone is responsible for all the miseries that Donald comes across in his life. Though Sister Aloysius is located within the system of Roman Catholic Institution, she is capable of enacting a systematic disruption that denies the male purveyor and his uninterrupted enjoyment of the system. She executes this paradoxically by using the system and holding on to it to resist the man's freedom inside it, either to maroon him within it or drive him completely away from it.

On the contrary, Father Flynn who resembles a cunning crow is able to escape to another institution where he can pull on his authoritative survival and enjoy the pleasures of life as usual till his clandestine affair with the alienated children is found out by someone like Sister Aloysius. Hence, it can be considered that the male triumph achieved by Father Flynn throughout the play and particularly at the end of the play is only an epitome of male-tyranny and spiritual vacuum. The most regrettable fact about the play is the survival of the oppressor and his incessant enjoyment of all the benefits of promotion and the higher status of his career till the end as his vile act lacks concrete evidence.

It is quite obvious through her authoritative conversation with Sister James that Sister Aloysius is very much after the rigidity of the traditional educational system. Still, she is strongly against the monotonous and stereotypical teaching-learning practice of it. Therefore, she firmly suggests, "The best teachers do not perform, they cause students to perform" (D 11). She further defines, "Good teachers are never content Innocent teachers are easily duped" (12). As she is a self-conceited woman, she poses as a hard-task master and also advocates that good teachers should be ever vigilant, cold and cunning to create fear in the minds of the students which in return will make them achieve outstanding academic performance. As an experienced teacher, she fails to realize that she is in close association with innocent children who are often considered as the personification of the Almighty. Her role doesn't fail to remind the reader of the totalitarian mental attitude of the leader pig, Napoleon that promotes the motto, "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others" (83) in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

As she is very much cautious of the prevalence of the hierarchy structure in the institution, she constantly reminds Sister James to be aware of it. When the latter persuades the former to lodge a complaint against Father Flynn of his sexual advancement towards Donald Muller, Sister Aloysius abruptly denies her suggestion saying, "You are answerable to me, I to the monsignor, he to the bishop, and so on up to the Holy Father. There's a chain of discipline. Make use of it" (D 8). In addition, she mentions several times in the play about the existence of the patriarchal authority and its biased system in the church as well as in the institution. Its sole duty is safeguarding the irreligious priests and choking the throat of their victims. She is certain that every frantic effort taken against the predators would end only as a futile one as it goes unnoticed, uncared and unanswered. Moreover, she tries to inculcate her own self-conceited attitude of "be skeptical" (12) in Sister James to remain as "a fierce moral guardian" (13) to the young innocent children as well as to protect her life from the ever impending threat of the patriarchal system.

The character of Sister Aloysius is ridiculous and pitiable. It is because she has entered into religious service only after becoming a widow but appears as an embodiment of chastity,

spirituality and discipline. It is quite ironic to learn that a nun who has experienced the conjugal pleasures of life expects others to be perfectionists and completely sin-free. At the same time, it should be accepted that her powerlessness and conservative attitude are the two motivating factors that force her to dig a pit against the priest. Hence, she goes to the extent of conducting a direct investigation in the boy's case instead of seeking the moral and the official support of her superiors. The purpose behind her direct involvement in the boy's issue is to prove Father Flynn as a paedophile and a dangerous threat to the special children like Donald Muller. She knows pretty well that her allegations against the priest would be ignored as baseless and meaningless by her superiors. Hence, she helplessly explodes, "there's no man I can go to, and men run everything. We're going to stop him ourselves" (22). She came across such paedophile priest in the institution where she had worked eight years ago. While she was in service at St. Boniface, she could identify, expose and eliminate the predator among the priesthood. She could achieve her target by lodging a complaint with Monsignor Scully. But, this time her superior is not like that of the superior in the former institution. The same resilient attitude might have instilled in her a spirit of determination and confidence to root out the existence of Father Flynn from his religious and academic service. Her conjecture against the priest's strange acquaintance with Donald Muller is further strengthened when Sister James informs her of the boy's peculiar behaviour in the classroom immediately after his visit to the rectory. She further rouses the doubt of the senior staff by saying, "There was alcohol on his breath" (D 22). Thus, all the characters in the play one way or other try to expose the unruly atmosphere that exists in the institution.

Whether it is the charismatic Father Flynn or the benevolent Sister Aloysius or the ambitious Sister James, they collectively or individually torture and ill-treat the boy from all the directions possible. It is ultimately confirmed when Sister Aloysius utters, "He's isolated ... Our first Negro student" (21). Similarly, Father Flynn who poses himself as too moderate and compassionate need not have mentioned Muller as, "... the only Negro in the school" (54). If they all have a real care and love for the boy, they need not have ostracised him by showing extra care and attention to him. They trespass in to his world and mar his blissful state of innocence and joyful state of freedom. It is quite discernible that the extra solicitude and love shown to the boy of the socially and economically deprived community altogether discriminate and debase him to the worst. Everybody around him other than his mother plays with the emotions, sentiments and life of the boy. Their only intention behind their ruthless activity is nothing but satisfying their whims and fancies. One such instance is that Sister Aloysius suspects Father Flynn's indulgence in child molestation based only on some circumstantial evidences and lot of presumptions. It is also quite ridiculous to know that the oppressed becomes the oppressor by oppressing the oppressed. It is quite relevant to the role played by Sister Aloysius as she tries to wield her power over the innocent boy, his mother and Sister James, a novice to the institution in addition to Father Flynn.

Though Father Flynn cannot be altogether branded as a paedophile just because he grows long nails, advises his students to maintain clean nails and possesses a good taste for lumps of sugar, his supplication to his opponent in the concluding part of the play raises umpteen doubts about his magnanimity towards the boy. He need not have unnecessarily explained and proved his innocence to Sister James and at the same time, it is also not essential for him to be highly emotional when Sister Aloysius informs him of the promiscuous statements made by the nuns of other parishes where he has already rendered his service. Above all, the playwright need not have assigned a role to a crow that "caws" (D 42) when the priest is about to take notes of argument that is going to take place between him and the nun. The phrase the priest uses at the end of the play prove that he is a man of vicious nature as every other ordinary human being. He shamelessly

and openly admits, "Am I person flesh and blood like you ... I can't say everything ... There are things I can't say ... I put myself in your hands" (55). He unashamedly capitulates in in front of a woman with a sole intention of overcoming the critical condition of the present to convert the same shameful act as a platform for his future survival.

Both Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn try to overpower each other as they want to anchor and ascertain two different cultures namely traditional or conservative and modern culture in the same institution. Moreover, it comes to lime light that they are the replica of the society in which they live. All the characters in *Doubt* fail to realise that the innocent child-victim is also a real human with all virtues and vices like that of them. It is no wonder that the dead body of Donald Muller would also undergo racial discrimination, humiliation and shamelike that of a Khoi-San woman by name Saartjie Baartman in Suzan Lori Parks' *Venus*. Her dead body has been kept to be exposed for scientific reasons in a museum just because of her enormous derriere. According to the anti-racist critic Lillian Smith in Cliff's *Making Face, Making Soul*, "Through objectification ... an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition, self-realisation, and overarching all this, denied selfhood" (272). The above-mentioned criticism is applicable not only to Saartjie Baartman in *Venus* and Donald Muller in *Doubt* but also to the nuns and the boy's mother present in the play. Is it not true that the culture of a country is raped when a child of it is raped?

The prevalence of racism, gender discrimination, the clash between democracy and totalitarianism, improper hierarchy structure, sexual harassment, superficial concern for marginalised students, chaotic adult world, silence of the helpless victims, power crisis, spiritual vacuum, deviousness, stratagem, slavery, etc. prove that not only the religious institutions in America but a whole lot of religious institutions in other parts of the world also prove themselves to be a real curse and a bane to their inmates in particular and the society in general. This kind of power game between Tom and Jerry will come to an end only when everyone realises that his life in the world is a really a rare gift offered to him. Though it is ephemeral, what he needs to do is nothing except realising, recognising, respecting and accepting the values of his fellow human beings as that of him. It is of no use in singing hymns in praise of the Almighty instead of serving an ailing and a helpless fellow-being who struggles very hard to survive in the chaotic world where everybody is after something or somebody to rob of his or her valuable service. As long as the moral and the spiritual vacuum remain in the religious institutions, they can prove themselves only as the abodes of pandemonium. This is the message that is strongly and clearly conveyed in John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*.

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