



Embodying Narratives of Altered Protagonists: A Reading of *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens Adapted by Tanika Gupta

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Abstract— *The need to revisit Charles Dickens’ novel Great Expectations in an adaptation as a play by Tanika Gupta serves as a renewal of the classic story that signifies the depiction of complex human relationships and its accompanying emotional turmoils. The play in its artistic capacity effectuates a profound rendition, proving to be a workmanship whittled in the fine art of storytelling. It is a story that is redrawn and retold in a compelling tale of love and search for identity and its accompanying erasures as its major leitmotif. The plot of the play foregrounds individual tales that we encounter in the consequence of colonial history. In the play, Pip’s centrality as a protagonist, is of someone whose journey of life is mired in the upheavals of love and poverty. Though his decision towards a realisation to become “a gentleman”, in terms of acquiring ‘mannerisms’ like that of the English, appears to be life changing. However, for Pip, the act of ‘becoming’ is a self-defeating act and a decision that has tragic ramifications. The paper focusses on the idea of literary texts and their parallel adaptive coherence that gives impetus to the origination of qualitative ideas as art forms that find a natural embrace with each other. The adaptation also seeks to embody a certain theatrical origination by way of putting the novel within the scope of a vibrant discourse of life’s meanings through stage space. Texts finding a mutual correspondence, is in a way directed to dilate progressive ideas through the stage, is best exemplified through Tanika Gupta’s adroitness as a playwright.*

Keywords— *Adaptation, Colonialism, Conflict, Identity, Postcolonialism.*

The reading of the play *Great Expectations* by Tanika Gupta as an adaptation comes to us in the light of new writings in contemporary theatre. The play was “First performed at Watford Palace Theatre from 17 February-12 March 2011” (Gupta “Introduction”). The play is pitched in the narratives of identity claims, entwined in a complex matrix of human relationships, set amidst a background of colonial past. It is thereby twinned in the voice of the personal and political. The play, through its characters, focusses on the evocation of anguished memories, portraying the painful emotional and psychological dimensions that colonialism has for its discourse and which comes across as an integral aspect of

the narrative. The play brings within its fold, a coalesce of events where lives are eventually torn asunder in a developing tragic circumstance. However, it is interesting to note that Tanika Gupta redraws an established narrative of the novel that compellingly invokes questions from history, as an idea expressing the desire to ask contemporary questions that the stage space puts forth. The play also goes onto express an autonomous view, as to how questions of identity can be negotiated through the telling tales of creative performance as

adaptations through stage space. As Frances Babbage in his book *Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre* mentions,

Adaptation finds a natural home in the theatre. Here, audiences expect and want retellings: reproduction and reinterpretation are central to theatre's raison d'être. In the Darwinian sense of the term, adaptation signals that rather than 'a divine design, we have a continuous process': theatre manifests this conspicuously, returning to and ever altering its materials, needing to do so in order to stay alive." (Babbage 9)

The *Great Expectations* as a title assumes an overwhelming meaning, one which could be seen as a metaphor in action, a story that compellingly works in the life attitudes of its characters toward consequences that are both debilitating and enervating. As a play, it serves as a compelling parallel, paralleled in the chronological consequence in the year "circa 1861", much like the novel that it adapts to. The play in its inaugural depictions positions the plot of the play in the memory of a colonial past and also highlights a crucial historicity mired in questions of identity conflict and their compelling need for self-assertion. The essential thrust of adaptation also seems to gain strength with the familiarity of names of the characters replicated in the play from the novel is an aspect that the adaptation seeks to embody. The play impacts a wider interpretation towards a reading of the novel, where colonialism as an ideology finds resistance and its stratagems of subjugation constantly challenged. As Pramod K. Nayar mentions in the book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*,

...Colonization found its climactic moments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was an exploitative mechanism—economic exploitation of resources, the use of native peoples, the conquest of territory and markets—based on the difference in race, culture, forms of knowledge, technological advancement and political systems between the Europeans and the natives. (154)

It is also to be noted that the idea of the play is rooted in the context of the postcolonial response to colonialism as Pramod K. Nayar brings to focus a pertinent reminder that, "Retrieving histories for a postcolonial culture invariably means dredging through some horrific memories and an intense awareness that 'native' history without colonial contamination is simply not possible" (*Postcolonial Literature* 51).

The major thrust of the play centres around the story of Pip who is "a 12/13 year old boy" and who is an orphan left to his sister and brother-in-law, Mrs. and Mr. Gargery to be cared for. The dark gloomy environs of the "deserted cremation ground", is where Pip is found and his chance meeting with Abel Magwitch, a "Black/African Convict from the Cape Colony" (Gupta "Characters"), suggests a striking inauguration to the play's opening act which would eventually have far-reaching consequences in the progression of the plot.

The opening remarks by Abel Magwitch to Pip is a stark reminder that the emerging tensions that the play puts forth, has its deepening resonance in the situation where the two characters are found. The painful rigours of the colonial conflict, is where the individual is caught in the cross-fires of politics of oppression and denial of dignity. The crisis which appears on the horizon is deeply embedded in the discourse of persecution and misery, as Abel Magwitch tells Pip that he is trying to escape colonial brutality and is on the run from the "hulks", meaning the "prison ships". A horrendous description of the "hulks" is made through an evident remark within Pip's household, as rumours become rife about the "hulks" and their presence catching sight in the narrativized anxious tellings of people, who cite their sightings with deep anxiety.

JOE. When I was little, and I saw those Hulks from the shore, they used to scare me. Big and black, like ghost ships, you can hear grown men moaning from inside. Ugly things they are. Cribbed and barred and covered in massive rusty chains just like the prisoners (Gupta "Act 1 Scene 2")

The play in its positioning of its characters in a certain chronological time-period puts Abel Magwitch in the torment of physical violence and colonial oppression. He recounts his experiences, where his painful accounts of his past evokes a deep sense of injustice played out in the ruthless effacing of the promises of his life. It is here, where the playwright seems to be reflecting upon a certain aspect of carcerality that is being referred to with reference to the "hulks". A critical reference to it is made in the book *Metaphors of Confinement* by Monika Fludernik, where she cites the references to the nature of imprisonment in the chapter "Industry and Idleness: Discipline and Punishment in the Capitalist Prison", it is here, where a reference to the "hulks" has also been provided.

It is Magwitch, who narrates his past to Pip and the many ordeals that he has had to face in his life. It is in the unfolding of the play, where stories of oppression and privations overshadow a deep-seated conflict played out

in the idea of 'difference' that arise in the nature of conflict meted out to individuals, especially Magwitch. The unravelling of events also arise in an understanding, where individual lives have been brought under machinations of colonial oppression and lives sabotaged forever. Abel Magwitch, who is a runaway convict, is a man who in his attempt tries to escape the drudgeries of colonial oppression which he is made to undergo as a convict. Pip, who is an innocent orphan boy, helps him get food and a "file" so that Magwitch can escape his misery, though only partially. As Magwitch recounts his condition, "like animals...chained up like a dog on a leash..."(Gupta "Act 1 Scene 3), is his agonising remark about himself. The idea that Abel Magwitch conceives of an image about himself is an outcome of an anguished soul, one who is displaced and dispossessed and in bitter resistance to the hold of the colonial sway in which he has been brought under. As Pramod K. Nayar asserts the idea of colonialism with regards to Frantz Fanon's views and where he talks about the nature of colonialism stating, "Colonialism is a violent conjugation where the sense of self develops through a negotiation rather than a separation, a relation rather than a disjunction, with the Other" (*Contemporary Literary* 157).

The agonising past of Magwitch makes him suffer the indignity of being seen as less than a human. It is an emotional, psychological blemish that he carries with him at all times. The memory that follows Magwitch, has been usurped by a consciousness that haunts him and is reified in the atrocities of the present. Pip, who is unaware of his future association with Magwitch, has a life journey that he undertakes and where Abel Magwitch would eventually play a significant role in his life. Magwitch speaks to him both like an outsider/insider, as Magwitch recounts his past. He mentions:

MAGWITCH. Came as a young man as a sailor. Crossed those oceans many times-went as far as China. Settled here and called it home. But everywhere those white devils treat the black man worse than the brown man. (Gupta "Act 1 Scene 3")

The projections in the play seem to reflect a story emulating a classic, but takes its lead in putting forward a newer idea, towards assertion of identity borne out of the rigours of colonialism and played out in the severity of colonial oppression and thereby thriving on the idea of difference as part of its intrinsic nature. It is interesting to note that the play is not just about the misery of one character but deals with the lives of a

multitude of characters in conflict with their circumstance.

The story of Abel Magwitch who detests the idea of colonial tyranny has his life's beliefs simmering with ire and dissension towards the coloniser. He fumes over his gloomy situation that has rendered him helpless as a man and is someone who has been pushed to the edge. His circumstances have held him hostage for a long time and has had him arrested in the merciless clasp of an undying outrage. He is a man, in whose life love and compassion remains a distant dream. The play constantly evokes this aspect of life in the experiential realm of its characters describing their sufferings as an outcome of dire circumstances of colonialism and is also seen as a personal and an emotional trial. Abel Magwitch is a man who has lost his family, leading to which a deep sense of rootlessness overpowers him, as he is played around by forces that are beyond his control. Magwitch recounts his past and narrates his story to Pip and his friend later in the play.

MAGWITCH. My Pip and Pip's brother...in jail, out of jail, in jail, out of jail. There-that's my life. I've been locked up, beaten, whipped, carted here, shipped there...I don't even know where I was born. I first became aware of myself down by the sea in Cape Colony, stealing fish from the fishermen. I know my name was Magwitch and my first name-Abel. I grew up somehow, thieving, scrounging, begging... (Gupta "Act 2 Scene 6")

Pip, on the other hand is a major character in the play and a figure who belongs to an unforgiving past, a child without parents whose life is delivered in the hostilities of deprivation and poverty. Mired in a life of drudgery and hardships, his only state of escape from his present situation is to acquire the ways of the 'English', as he makes his life choices. This idea occurs to him as a belief that gains potency over a period of time and comes alive in a power apparatus that he thinks will alter his life's fortunes. Though it is a belief that runs an oppositional trajectory and Pip will understand its truth in due course of time.

Magwitch and Pip are brought together by the hands of destiny and interestingly their lives will be affected by the upheavals of colonialism. Magwitch has undergone the rigours of physical violence, while Pip's life will be usurped in the impressionable years of his childhood, in which he is made to understand the complexities of his life situation. Wanting love and dreading a miserable financial situation, he aspires for life's validation, for he is an orphan who has lost his

parents and looks at his life as a desire that is always in a state of lack. Though his only support remains his brother-in-law who provides him with emotional comfort and friendship. The play constantly seeks to put its characters in the light of an awareness that love remains a fantastical seeking of oneself, sometimes in the reflections of people's warm embrace and sometimes in its dearth. The play also narrates a human story invoking this theme, where 'love' in its illusory nature eludes people's lives and renders them hapless. For the lack of it, the characters either become self-indulgent or self-effacing.

As the play progresses, Pip is forced to go to the house of Miss Havisham, an "English elderly woman" who lives by herself in a "big house" and who wants Pip to come to her house to "play" with her, is quite a paradox of circumstances. She is a woman of substantial affluence and becomes a major influence in Pip's onward journey. As Pip's sister discusses Pip's prospects in the light of an emerging opportunity that her brother could have in Miss Havisham's company.

MRS GARGERY. Her old father was a trader from the East India company. Now she's an old lady who just lives on her own in that big house. ...And later ...

MRS GARGERY. She asked Uncle Pumblechook to help her find a local boy who would go to her house and play there. (Gupta "Act 1 Scene 5")

Pip's meeting with Miss Havisham is the play's turnaround moment. The class divide that makes itself evident, is a reminder of Pip's miserable state of circumstance as a native. His humble background is a reason why he is seen as marginalised and is being sent to entertain a "memsahib", Miss Havisham. In the book *Awakening*, Subrata Dasgupta in the chapter "A City of Two Towns", he narrates the category of the "sahib" and the "memsahib" as a category of privilege and status often accorded to the English as a point of reference. The idea of "memsahib", as it is deeply entrenched in the discourse of colonialism, came to be recognised as a reflection of a certain hierarchy, which has a strong recurrence in this play, much like Tanika Gupta's another adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Pip's realisation of his ragged appearance serves as a moment of truth, a life mired in the entanglements of humble living. It is a situation that is despised and mocked at, by a girl called Estella who stays with Miss Havisham. His acquaintance with Miss Havisham comes across as a great learning curve for him. Though Pip's sister Mrs. Gargery thinks that their life's circumstances would change, only if he is in Miss

Havisham's company. However Miss Havisham who is considered to be a woman of affluence has nothing to give him as she herself has lost everything to destiny. Being jilted and duped in a relationship, she finds herself trounced in her quest towards 'great expectations'. The play seeks to showcase the binaries of conscious choices entrenched in the realisations of people, leading their lives in the fortunes and misfortunes of love and then there are those who also suffer the pangs of poverty and oppression along with it.

The play interestingly draws forth characters who are standing at the crossroads, their hearts full of 'great expectations', as characters separated and joined by fate. Miss Havisham, who appears to be a prospective benefactor to Pip, has her own ordeal of dealing with her past. Her life is no different than that of Pip's, it's frozen in a circumstance where her confinement has taken away her joys and she now walks amidst the ruins of her life's estrangements. As a typical story, rooted in colonial history, the play foregrounds varied ideas that become part of the academic argument that stems forth from the play. It is that of Pip's resistance to colonial attitudes where he decries going to Miss Havisham's house, but also resigns to the fact that he desires to acquire the ways of the 'English' in the beginning, is something that draws an interesting critical enquiry. He wishes to learn manners and mannerisms of the English, deeming it fit as an attitude for social elevation and acknowledgment and all those around him who eagerly await a change, thinking that this could be a way out for him. Adapting to the ways of the English is not just an innocent emulation that Pip desires but it acts out as a performance in the narrative, embedded in the strongholds of a colonial schema. As Nayar mentions,

A central feature of colonialism was its ability to generate convincing images of itself. Projecting itself (and the colonizing culture) as superior and benevolent, as Edward Said has shown (1978) colonial self-representation managed to convince the native culture that this image was true and authentic. In short, natives began to agree with such images as superior Western/primitive native, benevolent Westerner, colonialism as development and so on. Often this resulted in a condition where the native sought to model himself... after his white benefactor/patron/protector. (*Postcolonial Literature* 45)

The playwright uses the template of the classic novel to delineate a more engaging question of human lives spent in identity conflict, more so in a world that has been usurped and appropriated by the pangs of colonialism. The play is a telling tale of emotions under duress and an individual's need to placate an unruly life situation that has caught her/him off guard and has inadvertently thrown them in the eye of the storm. Having found themselves in a miserable situation, the characters' lives are torn asunder in the fear of loveless lives brought under circumstances of great emotional and psychological turmoil. Pip and his family, his sister and brother-in-law are lives of ordinary people whose only aim in life is to alter their chances of not being excluded from life's favourable opportunities. For this, Pip wants to acquire the ways like that of the 'English', lest he realises that he is an independent young man who is free to make a choice of his own and that does not necessarily mean to be like 'someone' or 'something'. But within the limitations of his life choices, he thinks that to be like an 'Englishman' would be an escape that he can readily choose. However, that comes across as a great paradox in the play's unfolding.

The play is also a journey for its characters, as they all share an experience of knowing themselves and stand as witnesses towards an unfolding of events. Interestingly the characters portrayed in the play are victims of their circumstances, held in their social, historical realities. Miss Havisham is lonely and debilitated. Her trauma is in her realisation that there shall be no one who will ever return her love. Estella cannot love anyone because her life with Miss Havisham has not offered a good life example to be emulated. For her, it is Miss Havisham's life as a tragic testimony which has an ominous bearing on her mind. Pip, on the other hand, thinks of Miss Havisham and the English as outsiders. Nevertheless, he, in fact, wants to be a part of their world, thinking that their world would be an escape from the drudgeries of a difficult life as an orphan. But the one thing that binds them all together, is that they are all held in a difficult circumstance, where love is a rare commodity and they all invariably look for its fulfilment.

The play constantly works through life's paradoxes, as situations in which the human agency is always at the risk of running a lost battle. Pip's growth as a child to a young man takes him places, as it all adds to his experience, as a young man who has traversed through his life situation hoping to make it big. The playwright chooses the story of Pip as a major fulcrum where the fate of other life stories are carefully poised and are affected by his experiences. The play critiques the usual ways of looking at the coloniser-colonised situation. The play

forwards a realisation where human choices are seen not as infallible, and is an idea that is brought within the scope of critical enquiry.

The play in its forward movement has Pip moving to Calcutta for his life's advancements. He is being told that a certain anonymous benefactor will be providing him for his better prospects. A secret that looms large in his life about the real benefactor who supports him in his endeavours, has kept Pip guessing for the anonymous person. Much to his amazement, he finds that it is Abel Magwitch who is behind his life changing events. The play narrates Pip's life journey but also establishes the absurdity of his life and the lives of others. The idea of love as an emotion that is in constant recession leaves many with a sense of withering hope and a desire that remains largely unmet. The play in its conflict presents its characters caught in the cross fires of emotional turmoil and an unspoken emotional restlessness.

For Pip, his 'great expectations' is to become the 'other' only to forsake his identity of his past. However, he realises the truth that in becoming one like the 'other', is in fact a hollow aspiration, one that is met with a realisation that the 'other' is also an enfeebled vision and has no real substantial meaning towards identity affirmation. With the realisation that it is Abel Magwitch who was instrumental in introducing him to the world of social acclaim and not Miss Havisham, it is Abel Magwitch who in his role as his real benefactor brings Pip out of his illusions and makes him confront the truth. Abel Magwitch, as an individual helps Pip in achieving his dream and is also seen validating his capacities as a human being. Pip also bonds with Herbert Pocket, an English boy with whom he establishes a close association and in his moments of his life revelations he understands the meaning of his friendship with him, is also one aspect that the playwright helps to foster as an idea.

The play seeks to interpret the idea of difference that is used as a device of colonial construct but also promotes a human story that is found within its layerings. Pip returns to an understanding of the importance of human relationships and the need for love that exists as a human desire. He embraces the simplicity of his past and returns to his brother-in-law, who is his true friend. He knows that the 'great expectations' is a lesson that he has learnt which is not to be expected in the finality of a conclusive dream vision but to experience the many opportunities that life provides in its constant probings.

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