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Annie Zaidi's *Name, Place, Animal, Thing*: A Study of Gender Dichotomy and Women's Status in Society

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Zaidi's play *Name, Place, Animal, Thing* is set in a typical upper-middle class apartment in an urban locality of Mumbai. The play consists of only two acts encompassing eleven scenes in the first act and three scenes in the second act. It depicts the conflict between two different worlds and focuses on the modern and the traditional values. The two worlds are the world of poor and the world of rich. The play presents other issues like generation gap and exploitation or subjugation of poor people who strive hard for their identity and dignity. Mr. Malik, his wife Mrs. Malik or Shalu, their adopted maid servant Nancy, her husband and sweeper Kunal, the cloth sailor Kapdu, the neighbour of Mr. and Mrs. Malik, Mrs. Rizvi or Rehana, her maid Insiya, the poor father of Nancy, Batua and a few neighbours in the apartment are characters in the play. Monali, the late daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Malik is referred throughout the play, but she is not physically present in the story. Mr. and Mrs. Malik, Mrs. Rizvi or Rehana represent the sophisticated world who have different problems whereas Nancy, Kapdu, Kunal, Insiya and Batua represent the world of poor people who fight for their survival and struggle hard for their space and identity. Zaidi's play portrays suffering of poor people. The characters can be easily divided into two groups as per their class and status.

The gender and class dichotomy and the status of women in society are symbolically referred in the title of Zaidi's play. The



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four words in the title is a game that Nancy used to play with Monali and Mrs Malik. The four words in the title 'Name', 'Place', 'Animal', 'Thing' refer to women at different stages and roles in a male dominant society. It is observed that they are always dependent on others and mostly these 'others' are men in different roles. The word 'name' universally refers to an identity which is either given by parents or is created by an individual. But in case of women, it is bestowed upon them by others. Women's identity is always vulnerable or can be changed easily before marriage by their biological parents and after marriage by their in-laws. In the play Nancy is forced to change her name from Puja to Sanskaaraa. According to Nancy a name is what you are meant to be. You should think about your family and their hope and not to worry about world and what do they think about you. So, she changes her name from Kalua to Sanskaaraa and likes to call Kapdu by his real name Rajkumar. She believes that name shall not be a lie. Family not only give a name, but also give dreams. She feels sad about her life and what she has got from her parents. She reveals her story to Kapdu that:

What did I get? Kalua! We were poor, but not so poor that they could not afford to give me a name better than Kalua. Something like Puja. Or even Mahua. When other people's babies are born dark, they get names like Nisha. Madhu. Or Krishna. May be my father thought, why burden the girl with name? Let her be free of all hope, all illusion. (187)

Nancy does not like her name Kalua given by her parents which directly reveals her skin colour and origin. She feels that nobody loves a girl called Kalua. Even her parents might not like this name, but their poverty might have forced to name their daughter Kalua.

Furthermore, Nancy converts her faith because Kunal insists her. She goes through a *shuddhi* ceremony before wedding. She takes new name Sanskaaraa. She insists Mrs. Malik to call her Sanskaaraa by her new name. She has changed her name from Puja to Nancy and now she is Sanskaaraa. For her this conversion of faith is not only the change in Gods but a way of returning to her



original roots. She feels proud that her husband has given her new name, subsequently a new identity. She responds to Rehana aunt's question about her identity given by her husband that, "My husband wanted to give me many things. But he had nothing. No house, no kitchen, no bed. So, he gave me a new name. He gave me a new meaning. Made me feel like I also meant something". (164) Unfortunately, their marriage ends in eighteen days. Kunal leaves her, but still she does not give up the name given by him. For Nancy name is her identity. According to her name means "what I could be. What my own family would have wanted me to be". (165). But Shalu and Rehana are not happy with her new name and want her to change the name given by her husband whom she leaves in eighteen days. Nancy changes her identity by changing her name. She dreams for good and fashionable name, but society does not allow her to change it. She sarcastically replies to Shalu who claims that she has done everything for her. Nancy feels overburdened by things which are forced upon her. She wants to live an independent. So, she replies to Shalu that:

You have given me everything I have. But I should be allowed to keep something that is my own. When I came to this house, I was wearing a frock which you gave. You gave me my first pair of shoes. You cut my hair. My family gave me nothing. But they sent me with a name. I should keep that at least. (166)

She often questions herself and thinks over her role in the family or society. The discrimination makes her forget her identity. She changes her religion and after marriage she converts her faith into Christianity. Generally, name is considered an identity, but Nancy is forced to change her name from Puja to Nancy and then Sanskaaraa. So, she considers herself not different from things or animals and calls herself donkey who is always controlled by others. And these differences are only because of the place from where she is come from. The class, place, and background influence her status in society. Nancy wants equal treatment like Monali, whom she quarrels very often. But she is not treated equally and is always reminded her origin and role in family. She is desperate to change her class by modern lifestyle and has fascination for jeans and



smart hair. She wishes to take modern name that can hide her poor identity. She feels that her name Nancy sounds very typical and indicates a poor girl who with her long straight hair, visits temples regularly. Kunal too forces her to change her name before wedding. She wants to work in a shop or an office and is desperate to earn money and obviously has a strong desire for change in her living standard. Simultaneously, she fears that her orthodox appearance will not help her in getting a good job. She says, "And if I go like this, who will give me a job? All the shop girls on Andrews Road wear jeans. They have smart hair, up to here, and..." (146). The word 'Place' refers to space or a comfort zone where one feel secure, live freely, and cherish once own identity. It implies the position of women in house or society. Women hardly have their place where they can enjoy liberty. In the play Nancy has left her parent's house from village and settles in a city and works as a servant or maid to Mr. and Mrs. Malik. Though she has shifted from one place to another, she still does not enjoy her life. After marriage with Kunal she again shifts to a hut in slum but still she is not happy and unwillingly returns to Mr. and Mrs. Malik. She elopes with Kapdu and again changes her place. Nancy does not settle at her own place. She is forcefully uprooted every time who wanders like a nomad without any permanent place of her own. Sadly, every time the new place is more painful than earlier. This is not only Nancy's story, but other women too are projected as dependent on 'others' mostly men and have forced to sacrifice self or compromise. This 'others' include many people in society. The women's stories in the play suggest that if women go against any established norms, they must suffer. Whereas Nancy is rebellious who dares to marry Kunal, and leaves Mr. and Mrs. Malik and elopes with Kapdu. But every time her life is more difficult and painful than earlier. She does not live happily with her inner urge for bold and courageous life. Everywhere she suffers and faces agony and torture. But now Nancy wants to go home. For Nancy, home is a private space where she could live life freely. Nancy desires for her space which will be her identity. She wants her own room though small, where she can sleep and keep her things



separately. She requests her husband Kunal for a roof even of plastic.

The third word 'Animal' refers to animalistic instinct among people or particularly in men. The play has several animal imageries. One of the prominent motifs in the play is dog with whom human beings are compared. Nancy tells the story of dog after her marriage with Kunal. The dog is a recurrent symbol or metaphor in the play which indirectly suggests wild behaviour of men who encroaches symbolically the flesh from women's body and mind. Nancy after her marriage with Kunal lives in company of dogs. She notices animals particularly dogs around her and surprisingly finds qualities of dog in her husband, who wildly exploits her body and mind. It is not only in her husband but everywhere she faces or sees such wild dogs around her. Mrs. Malik too agrees with her and accepts this pathetic situation of women in society. It is difficult for women to live without bleeding and losing things from their body and life. This animal instinct exists in society, but it is so subtle and common hence difficult to identify and appears as a normal practice of people. Nancy has been exploited at Mr. and Mrs. Malik's house from her childhood. She is not fortunate enough to live happy life and is exploited by people at different stages of her life.

Moreover, Nancy compares men's carnal desire with hungry wild dogs, who encroach flesh from women's body. She agrees with Rehana aunty that there are dogs out around us and remembers her days with Kunal and laments that, "Where we slept, there were dogs. Once a dog slept near me... That dog curled up, here, near my stomach. I was afraid. But the dog was also afraid. So, I called him close... people sleep with dogs. Big- big people. So, what if I did?". (159) Nancy justifies her decision of running away with Kunal and argues that she is not the only girl, but several people have committed such mistakes. Though her decision is proved wrong, she still holds it her own and does not blame others for that. It is her own decision, so she readily accepts its consequences. She is exploited and is left alone even by her biological parents, guardians, and husband. She calls them dogs who have turned her



into a bitch. She feels that the whole system is a trap that confines only women or the poor people.

The fourth word 'Thing' refers to lifelessness and often suggests a non-human entity. In the play it relates to women and can be linked to the value to their life in society. They are treated as objects and not human beings with independent self or identity. Their life is moulded or changed not by their own wish but by the dubious perception of others about them. They are treated as objects devoid of feelings or emotions. However, the four words in the title 'Name', 'Place', 'Animal', 'Thing' refer to women's identity, space, position, violence, and value to their life in a male chauvinistic society. Exploitation and suffering are inevitable parts of their life. Their situation is serious when they are from poor or lower-class.

In the play there are three important women characters: Nancy, Shalu, Rehana, and a reference to the fourth character of Monali, who never appears but is always referred to by other characters. Insiya the maid of Rehana is another minor woman character in the play. The focus is on the character of Nancy and her journey from a small child to a married girl from a remote village to city. Her whole journey is a painful experience of oppression at different stages of life. But she is not a silent sufferer and has a strong desire to fight against all problems and wants to live life on her conditions. Unfortunately, she does not get her own comfortable zone where she can enjoy freedom. Her story is an instance of the stereotypical social framework or societal approach which hardly allow liberty and equality to women for choosing and living life on their own terms. Those who dare to break these boundaries must suffer and lose their self. The stories of Monali and Nancy are the examples of women's suffering and exploitation irrespective of their caste, class, and religion. They represent the young generation who are independent and have rebellious instinct, but their sufferings do not end. On the other hand, Rehana and Shalu or Mrs. Malik represent the old generation, though they have settled in their life, but their life and thoughts are restricted. They cannot break all restraints of responsibilities. They suffer silently in the four walls of houses behind doors. Their life is not different no matter whether they are



rich or poor. They do not have their voice and could not allude agony loudly. Significantly, the play refers to Muslim women and a Hindu girl who has converted her faith. However, it mainly focuses on the issue that suffering does not have any religion. The play projects women with different emotions and background. The religious rituals except the Muslim names are not found in the play. The characters are either Muslim or Hindu, but are women, and their stories of suffering are not different. The social upbringing is such stereotypical which denies fundamental rights and even independent thinking. Women are treated as objects or things who are vulnerable and are made to suffer silently.

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