

Haresh Sharma's *Those Who Can't, Teach: A Play About Education System*

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ABSTRACT

The play Those Who Can't, Teach is a famous play of Singapore's prolific playwright Haresh Sharma. It highlights the lives of teachers and students in a typical secondary school in Singapore. The present paper seeks to explore how the play unfolds the challenges and pressures the teachers and students have to face in modern education system and deconstructs the traditional myths and stereotypes about image of teachers. It explores the dynamics and complexities of teacher-student relationships and roles and responsibilities of a teacher in contemporary era.

Those Who Can't, Teach is a famous play written by Singaporean playwright Haresh Sharma. It was first staged in 1990. It explores the education system and peeps into the lives of teachers and students in a local school in Singapore. The play is significant as it reveals the dynamics and complexities of teacher-student relationship along with the challenges and pressures before the education system. Although set in Singapore school, it crosses the boundaries and presents universal message regarding education system. The title of the play has been taken from George Bernard Shaw's famous quote "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." The play analyses the roles and capacity of teacher in shaping the lives of his/her students. It highlights the postmodern condition of contemporary world where uncertainty and confusion looms large over human mind. The world is changing faster and an individual is surrounded by numerous conflicting values and choices. It is very difficult for a postmodern human being to make a right choice in his life because the concept of right and wrong in itself has become fluid. It is ironical that knowledge adds more confusion rather than enlightenment in present age. In the introduction of the play Alvin Tan rightly observes:

Those Who Can't Teach is a play about the passion of one's calling. How do we appreciate dedication in an age of uncertainty- a world where there's an endless spiral of transitions, where change is the constant, and when we are so easily derailed by competing distractions? How can we be sure that we've made the right career choice or right choices in life? And don't the stakes get higher when we realize we have only one life? (*Those Who Can't, Teach* IX)

The play presents different kinds of teachers present in the education system. Whereas teacher like Su Lin dedicates her full life for this profession, her colleague Hana believes that teacher's personal and professional are different compartments. She doesn't accept the notion that teachers are the role models for society. She does not want to compromise on her personal life under the burden of role model principle. Her attitude towards teaching is professional not ideal. She comments:

Why should I be a role model? My contract says I must teach 7am to 2 pm. Sometimes 3pm. 6pm. Sometimes whole night. Sometimes whole weekend I must work. My contract never say I must be a role model. I am a teacher. I teach. I go home. I'm not friends with anyone here. I am their colleague. My work suck my blood. My own life I want to enjoy. (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 80)

Su Lin sacrifices her personal and family life for her students and teaching. She does not give enough time to her family. But in end of her life, she is left alone in nursing home. She keeps on believing, "In a relationship, one person usually loves the other more. In school, the teacher always loves the students more" (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 58). On being asked about her own children by Teck, Su Lin replies: "They visit when they can. When they decided to put me in this nursing home, I didn't know what to feel. I think I laughed. Why would they take care of me? I spent more time with other people's children than my own" (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 58). This reply contains tragedy in life of a dedicated teacher. In the pursuit of providing knowledge and love to their students, she didn't care enough of her own family. And now after the retirement she is alone in the world.

The play touches the issue of teacher's training system in Singapore. Teaching the teacher is certainly an important component in any education system but unfortunately there are many loopholes and shortcomings in the training system. There is a gap between theoretical and practical aspects of teacher's education and training. It is often observed that teacher training institutes fail to equip teachers with skills required to face the challenges of education system at ground level. This leads to disillusionment and frustration in a teacher's mind. In the play this disillusionment is reflected in the following Lim's remark:

NIE fucked me up! It didn't prepare me for school life. Everything was theory. How am I supposed to deal with parents, manage all the admin AND plan lessons AND teach AND follow up the weaker students? NIE was the pure unadulterated rubbish! (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 18)

The play interrogates the role of teacher in shaping career of a student. It is not only the teachers but other factors and forces of the life that decide the future of a student. Failure of a student is not only the responsibility of teacher but also of other stakeholders. On the day of retirement of his teacher Su Lin, Jali comes to meet her who always supported him and gave a ray of hope. But he couldn't perform according to her hope. In disappointing note he tells her teacher:

Cher...I never become anything. First time I take my exam, I fail. I try again. I still fail. You say believe... Believe in yourself. I believe. When I leave school, I work dispatch. I work driver. I work security. I still believe. For 15 years I believe. Then today I wake up, I see the SMS and then I think... I am not special. I got no gift. I got no talent. Cher... I never become anything. (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 83-84)

Su Lin feels sorry for his failure. But the remark of jail exposes the truth that person of a life depends on many forces and factors-social, economic, political etc. A teacher can give knowledge and hope for successful career but sometimes he fails due to other factors. It is true, "sometimes life cannot change for some people. Sometimes, people fail... (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 84). A teacher is considered as a God who can shape and make the life of his students. It is believed that he is the maker of a nation. It is assumed that he has control over a student's life. This belief and assumption inspires many bright minds to adopt the career of teaching. But the play questions this notion and forces us to think about its validity. When Lim in the play tries to inspire innovative thinking in his students he gets rebuked by the school authorities. His ideals are proved unpractical and dream of being the maker of future is shattered:

Maybe you should stop applying what you learnt at NIE and start doing what is best for this school. MOE called Principal to find out what this is all about. Why are we jeopardizing ourselves, they asked. Do we want to be autonomous, or do we want to remain mainstream forever... Don't think that just because you're a teacher, you're going to change students' lives. You're not going to change anything. (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 22)

The play also throws light on the relationship between administration and teaching. There is no doubt that administration has an important role in governing any system. It helps in streamlining the roles and responsibilities. But sometimes it is observed that too much interference of bureaucracy in the education system hampers its smooth functioning. Education department is different from other departments in its nature and functioning. Autonomy and innovation are the most important ingredients for an effective teaching system. The play highlights this conflict between administration and teaching. In the play the character of Zach reflects this conflict very well. The dialogue between Su Lin and Zack is worth to be noted in this context:

Su Lin: What's happened to you! You're an administrator or what? I thought you were a teacher!

Zach: I just want the consent forms. I'm in charge. It's my responsibility to ensure that we follow proper procedures. Someone has to! (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 15)

Zach who is PSC Scholar is more interested in administration than teaching. He likes to dictate his orders over other teachers. He himself admits his bossy attitude when he intends to get himself transferred from school to ministry of education, "I'm not cut out for this. I can't teach! I can boss people around. I can do admin work. Hell, I can sit in meetings for eight hours at a stretch. But I just can't teach" (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 80). But ironical to his attitude, he is awarded the Outstanding Teacher award of the year and promotion to HOD. Recognition of work is an important aspect in the life of any employee for motivation. Su Lin does get any award despite her hard work and dedication. This highlights another lacuna in education system.

The play touches upon the issue of examination system. An exam is conducted to assess the level of learning and intelligence of students. But largely examination system promotes bookish knowledge and theoretical details. It tries to assess students' knowledge in narrow and fixed standards. The students who don't fit in these standards are declared failed and unintelligent. But this approach is wrong. Sabtu, the Canteen owner of the school, wants that the students should work in his canteen. Su Lin is against this idea as she wants students to focus on their studies only. Subtu's remark regarding examination system and intelligence assessment forces us to think about examination system:

'O' level is exam. If you pass, doesn't mean you are smart. It means you know how to answer the question. I know how to make the best roti john. I know how to use computer, but 'O' level exam never ask me question about roti john, about computer ...some of the students here maybe cannot pass exam. But they are not stupid. I want them to find what they like to do. Because if they like something, they will work hard. That is all I want to do. (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 20)

The play highlights the issue of school politics. Any school staff should work like a united team to create proper academic atmosphere. But the conflicts and politics among the staff members ruin the academic atmosphere. This also leads to disillusionment and frustration in the minds of teachers. Hanna shows her frustration when she says, "Actually Su Lin after so many years, you still have so much passion. Coming to school for me is like getting my teeth pulled out. I hate the system, I hate the students, I hate the politics" (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 23-24).

Su Lin is a dedicated teacher who loves and cares her students. She always stands by her students. But she feels disheartened and disillusioned when she finds her students involved in undesirable activities. She feels helpless and dejected. Her helplessness is reflected when she comes to know about bad activities of students, "I really don't know what to do anymore. I'm lost! I am at a loss. Drinking, smoking, singing, shouting... Still in your school uniform. Disgracing

yourselves, disgracing the school... (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 39). She always pays attention to trouble makers- Tech Liang and Jali and tries to mend their behavior and manners. But they still don't listen to her because they are not ready to change. This attitude presents alarming situation for education system. Even fear of punishment does not deter the trouble makers. This attitude can be seen in when Jali says to his teacher Su Lin, "Cher... We drink, we smoke, we make noise... Everything wrong you say, we do. Now how? I cannot go back and change. You want to expel .You don't let us take 'O' level... We cannot do anything. We cannot change anything " (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 40-41).

In the play the student Teck Liang is charged that he has circulated the vulgar photos of her teacher Hana on the internet. His parents who are from lower economic background are called by the school for this reason. After listening about bad activities of their son his parents ask the teacher to scold him. His parents show their helplessness in controlling and mending behavior of their child. The dialogue between his mother and Su Lin reflects helplessness on the both sides:

Su Lin: We can scold him but we are only his teachers. We cannot control him.

Mrs. Ong: We also cannot control him. I don't know what to do anymore. What to do with a son that don't care? Don't respect his father and mother? (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 64)

Teck's father sells fish in the market and his mother works at a saloon. He compares his lifestyle with his wealthy classmate Raymond and feels inferior. Due to this inferiority complex, he is frustrated and dissatisfied with his parents. He feels that his parents are incapable and responsible for his low self esteem. How the economic inequalities in the society create negative impressions on the minds of young children is reflected in the following dialogue between Teck and his mother:

Mrs.Ong: You know how hard we work or not ? We every day work and work for you.

Teck: Work for me? You see my shoes. Got how any holes!

Mrs. Ong: We buy new one for you.

Teck: You can buy Nike for me? \$200,\$300... You can afford? (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 65)

He considers his parents unworthy of respect because they are not rich. Unconsciously he links their poverty to lack of their talents and potential. He says to his father, "Why he must work in market? Why he must sell fish? Why he cannot go office? Sell insurance. Sell house. Wear tie. Wear jacket. Raymond's father got car. Got condo. You all work so hard for what? We still have nothing!" (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 66)

This statement is eye-opener for policy makers and thinkers. This is statement from a child of a family which is trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. It also reflects dark

realities of capitalism in which certain sections of society don't get monetary rewards in proportion to their hard work. The play brings out the difference between Neighborhood school and Elite school of Singapore. Raymond a rich student does not like the atmosphere of the school. He is unsatisfied with the school and classmates. His views on education are different from others. When he does not value the passing certificate, Clare says:

Not everyone is like you ok Raymond. We all got no choice. We all must do well. If not, we cannot do anything... Cannot study... Cannot get good job... Jali is from Malay family. You know or not Malay family got very high failure rate, especially the poor family. (*Those Who Can't, Teach* 47)

The theme of Class difference shows how class factor affects the academic atmosphere of an educational institution. Class plays significant role in determining the personality of an individual. High class results into better access of resources and opportunities. In the play Raymond comes from high class. His choices and priorities are different from other classmates belonging to lower class. Marcus Yee rightly observes about this theme in the play:

Class differences are most pronounced between Teck Liang, the sensitive "Ah Beng" type character and Raymond Tan, a precocious student from a privileged background. Their class-based identity markers are not only mapped out through language, where Raymond's generic cosmopolitan language contrasts with Teck Liang's heavy use of Singlish peppered with expletives; they are most powerfully registered on the somatic level of smell, where Raymond smells of expensive shampoo while Teck Liang has a "fish smell", attributed to his fish seller parents.

Thus, it can be concluded that the play *Those Who Can't, Teach* peeps into atmosphere of a typical secondary school in Singapore and brings out the complexity of relationship between students and teachers. It also throws light on daily struggle of teacher's life and tries to break the stereotypes and fallacies about teachers. It seeks to treat teachers as a human being not as God and unburden them from the sole responsibility of success or failure of a student. It interrogates the role of parents, teachers and society in shaping the future of students. While bringing out the complexities, it also emphasizes the importance of relationship between teachers and students. The statement of Su Lin aptly reflects the importance of the relationship and spirit of the play:

Teaching is what I'm born to do. I see children come and go... Some of them become successful, whether in your career or in your education... Some don't... They don't have flying careers, they are not rich or famous... But to me you will always have a place in my heart .I want you to know that you have touched me... Meeting students like you... My life is not wasted. Thank you. God bless you for this... God bless you... God bless you...(*Those Who Can't, Teach* 86-87)

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