

# THEATRE INTERNATIONAL

UGC Approved Peer-Reviewed  
Multi-disciplinary International Journal  
UGC Serial No. - 49202  
Currently Indexed in UGC-CARE LIST

Vol. XII



Eds.

Amitava Roy, Bryan Reynolds, Sheila T. Cavanagh, Subir Dhar, Tapu Biswas

*A*

*Special Publication of*  
The Shakespeare Society of Eastern India



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## From the Editors' Desk

It has been a long time since we re-connected with you, our readers. First there was a longish period of reorganization of various parameters of *Theatre International (TI)* in order to be included in the UGC Care List, currently the highest academic certification for scholarly Journals like ours. Not only is TI now in this list but the certification includes back issues too. The UGC has insisted that all issues must be presented as printed material which can then be put on line.

The last issue of TI was released during the Kolkata Book Fair in 2019. Just after that the Editorial Team in Kolkata (Amitava Roy, Tapu Biswas, Subir Dhar, Sekhar Bose, Tilok Naskar, Pratima Das) was struck down with Malaria. We were cured after a month but the effects of LARIAGO, the strongest anti-malarial drug, lasted a long time leaving us too weak to handle Editorial work. By the time we were able to read proofs etc it was time for the March 2020 Pandemic too hit us. This played havoc with our co-Editors from USA and UK and ourslaves in Kolkata which is still under partial Lock Down.

But work must go on. So we are back to publishing TI from this November. TI Volume XII begins with Canadian Theatre Guru and leader of the Dramatic Arts across the globe Chistopher Innes's extended and newly revised text of *Rita Joe*. Innes died in 2017 and this is TI's tribute to a master who was part of our Editorial Team for long.

Rabindranath Tagore is well served by Dr. Arnab Chaterjee who explores the *King of the Dark Chamber* as a search for alternative modernist aesthetics very different from Western notions of Modernism and Modernity.

Raj Raj Mukhopadhyay ponders the problems and prospects of turning fiction into drama and film. He offers a production-log of *By The Tungabhadra* in an excellent paper which is the first full length study of this play that is making ripples on the Kolkata and Indian stage. The only criticism about this paper is that at times it suffers from political overkill.

Dr. Sujato Ghosh explores the ambiguities, miscommunications, silences and deep pauses, absurdity and terror, the menace inside and outside us in Pinter land through a analysis of *The Birthday Party*.

Professor Amitava Roy pens his personal recollections of Mahesh Dattani as a friend, theatre Guru and social commentator.

This is followed by Bidisha Munshi's detailed analysis of two of Dattani's riveting texts on discrimination and exploitation in Indian Society.

Research scholar Shirshendu brings Dattani to the fore again with his paper on Stage Props and Property, the philosophy and praxis of their use in Dattani's plays, specially in *Final Solutions*.

Dr. Tapu Biswas uncovers the facts behind Badal Sircar's wide acceptance as a theatre Guru in Manipur, his several visits and workshops there, his tremendous impact on Manipuri greats of theatre like director-playwright Kanhaialal and Aramban, and his continuing influence and inspiration on contemporary North-Eastern Theatres in India.

Dr. Swati Roy Chowdhuri, a noted specialist on Australian and Aboriginal life, society and theatre here explores Jack Davis' plays on the plight of Aboriginal women, their kinship system and their inherent strength of character.

Research scholar Shamshad Nahar from Seacom Skills University, Bolpur focuses on Music and Shakespeare giving us a detailed look at Feste's curtain number in *Twelfth Night*, "When that I was a little tiny boy". She takes up three Bangla versions of the song in post-Independence India, analyses in detail their relationship to each other and to Shakespeare's original version. In this fascinating comparative study she also provides a production-log of the songs on TV, on stage and in the World Shakespeare Conferences in Kolkata from 2004 onwards, presented by the Shakespeare Choir of the Shakespeare Society of Eastern India.

This XIIth volume concludes with Dr. Pinaki Roy's short history of war plays across the globe.

Happy reading

Amitava Roy and Bryan Reynolds, Eds

## **Rita Joe moves to Kapuskasing: Native Indians on the Canadian Stage**

**Christopher Innes**

[Christopher Innes, globally renowned theatre expert specialising on Canadian drama, had been associated with *Theatre International (TI)* as a senior contributing co-Editor from 2005 onwards. As a theatre guru he would regularly advise us on what kind of academic and creative writing *TI* should include. Indeed we learnt a lot from this masterly colleague of ours. Fifteen years ago we published his paper on Canadian drama, *Rita Joe comes to Kapuskasing*. Apart from being in *TI*, Professor Innes honours included holding the prestigious “Canada Research Chair in Performance and Culture at York University”, and “Distinguished Research Professor and Canada Council Killam Fellow.” This versatile master of theatre theory and praxis of Canadian drama in relation to Canadian society and world drama left us two years ago after a magnificent innings heading the world’s dramatic arts. Before his much mourned demise in 2017 Dr. Innes sent us this revised extended and enlarged version of *Rita Jo* for publication in his favourite drama journal *TI*. We present this paper as a tribute to the memory of a great friend and a great theatre guru.]—Eds.

Canadians often express the view that they are a culturally endangered species, whose indigenous art is in constant danger of being drowned out by imported products; and this sense of cultural colonization is perhaps most acute in the theatre. French Canada is to some extent protected by linguistic difference; but Canadian English offers no barrier to either British culture of the colonial past, or the American economic dominance of the present. Up to the 1950s, the English speaking stage in Canada was largely occupied by touring companies based in London, or particularly New York. Even so, although America dominates the film and television markets, during the 1970s there was a flowering of Canadian drama, fostered by nationalist feelings that rose from the centennial of Canadian Federation and by the building of new arts and theatre centers across the country as a way of marking this event. Since then, however, Canadian

cultural autonomy has come under increasing threat from cuts to arts funding, and from North American Free Trade Agreement, under which U.S. negotiators are demanding open access to Canada's cultural industries.

The development of new Canadian plays remain the specific mandate of one main-stage English-Canadian theatre company<sup>1</sup>, although in practice these make up less than a third of its productions. Apart from this, there are occasional plays that appear at regional centres, or are commissioned by the Stratford Festival in Ontario. So Canadian works are effectively relegated to the small scale, alternate theatres, in effect marginalizing Canadian drama, even within Canada. At the same time, however regrettable, this state of affairs as such is less significant than the perception it engenders, and the way this conditions a significant stream of Canadian playwrighting.

On one level, this sense of marginalization might look like an inhibiting inferiority complex. But from another angle, being on the margins can be seen as a positive advantage. Marginality becomes asserted as a source of authentic creativity (uncompromised by commercialism –in the Canadian context, a code-word for U.S influence). It also serves as a guarantee of political correctness (being automatically distinct from and in opposition to a center, which is rejected, almost by definition, as philistine and materialistic). Indeed, Canadians sometimes assume literary marginality to be intrinsically Canadian. Yet it has a long-established international dimension.

It is an aspect of the regionalism that finds expression even in the imperial centre of Britain through the nineteenth-century novels of Scott and Hardy, culminating in the writing of D.H.Lawrence that extol the values of a provincialism based on social geography and class. On a rather different level, today it finds linguistic reflection in the untranslatable Glaswegian of Liz Lochhead's poetry, or the conscious Irishness of Seamus Heaney, and forms the theme of Brian Friel's play *Transtations*. Such localized specificity can be seen as a reaction to the increasing homogenization of English as a world-wide language for commerce, science and airlines. It becomes a way of countering the abstraction and impersonality of sharing a global language, though in each of these

examples it is also an assertion of national identity against the dominance of English centralism.

As a way of expressing national distinctness, this insistence on the value of marginality is certainly echoed in English Canada. But here the form it takes is seldom linguistic – perhaps partly because, with a high proportion of recent immigrants from diverse language groups, there is little in the way of a clearly “Canadian” dialect. Rather, the average speech is largely standardized North American. So for a Canadian dramatist, working in the margins means choosing particular venues and themes, which tends to translate into regional plays designed for fringe performance: David French’s *Newfoundland* family trilogy; James Reaney’s workshop trilogy about the Irish immigrants in Ontario, *The Donnellys*; or the type of improvised community show development by Theatre Passé Muraille in the seventies. Regionalism can also, of course, be defined in completely non-geographical terms. As in Britain or elsewhere, there are special interest theatre-companies, such as the Toronto-based “Buddies in Bad Times”, which speaks specifically to and about gay men and lesbians, or the feminist “Nightwood Theatre”. And this sort of “marginalized” development is both logical and possibly essential.

As on the political scene, where growing internationalism (the EEC, or NAFTA) is accompanied by increasing demands for independence from minorities (whether Scottish, Quebecois, or Walloon), so the renewal of localized roots, or the search for counter-cultural diversity, becomes a necessary artistic tactic to resist the leveling pressures of the global village. Such indeed is the argument of a 1989 book on Canadian drama, called *Producing Marginality*, which picks up on playwright Rick Salutin’s assertion: “We can deny that marginality is negative. We can claim it as a strength.”<sup>2</sup>

It is also, of course, a commonplace that to achieve universal significance, literature – and particularly drama – must be grounded in the concrete specificity of “a local habitation”. So it is not surprising that David French’s plays, which started out in the alternate theatre, were almost immediately adopted by mainstream stages. In fact, despite the association of integrity with marginality, in terms of contemporary

Canadian drama distinctions between counter-culture and the centre are blurred, even at times interchangeable. Thus various annual alternate theatre festivals have sprung up across Canada; and in 1988 the longest running of these, the Edmonton Fringe Theatre Event sold over 350,000 tickets, ironically outpacing establishment flagships like Stratford, to become the biggest drama festival in the whole of North America.

Thus it is paradoxically characteristic that one of the defining lines of Canadian drama deals with the most marginalized of all segments in society—the ultimate outsider: both alienated and seen as alien; dispossessed, pauperized and banished to isolated ghettos—the North American Indian. Historically, the dominant social attitude to the dwindling Indian population had been reflected by their almost complete marginalization on the Canadian stage. In their rare appearances Indian characters were either presented as murderers and deceitful savages – the other in its most extreme form – or (very occasionally) as noble subordinates of the Imperial cause (for example, in an unproduced, heroic verse tragedy like *Tecumseh*). However, at precisely the point when Canadian drama began to assert itself in specifically national terms, there was a revolution in the way Indians were presented.

The first of the new – wave playwrights of the 1960s was George Ryga; and the works on which his reputation is based focused on the Indian experience. Indeed Ryga's initial stage piece carried the deliberately provocative title of *Indian*, while the play which has become generally recognized as a major landmark in this newly emerging Canadian drama, was *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.

The son of refugee Ukrainian immigrants, growing up on a subsistence farm in northern Alberta during the Great Depression, Ryga always took the position of an outsider. In opposition to a hierarchical society that he saw as turning the majority of its citizens into displaced people, his work was designed to counter “official” Canadian history by creating an alternative national mythology from the unarticulated experience of the immigrants and outcast, and from the unacknowledged subculture of the working classes. For him, Indians were not a special case, but exemplary in the sense of being the most extreme example of the way a capitalistic

establishment exploited the majority of Canadians. As he said, the Cree reservation bordering his parents' homestead exposed him to "demoralization and degradation" that was

"about as total as any society can experience anywhere in the world. These people had been worked over by the church; they had been worked over by the Hudson's Bay Company. There was nothing left. There was no language left any more."<sup>3</sup>

All this is reflected in *Indian*, where the title figure is first threatened by a farmer, who has hired him as a casual labourer to set up a fence, then challenges and drives off an Agent of the Indian Affairs Department. But in this short one-act piece, promoting understanding of the native predicament is secondary to attacking the prejudices of the – at that time – all-white audience. Initially, seen through the farmer's eyes, the (unnamed) Indian seems to have all the worst characteristics of the racial stereotype. He and his companions are lazy (in a whole day the three of them only managed to drive 29 fenceposts), unreliable (the other two vanished in the night without doing what they'd been paid for), reckless and self-destructive (they bought bad whisky with the farmer's money instead of food, and burnt their own tent down in a drunken party). However, when the government official's patronizing paternalism provokes the Indian, these clichés are exposed as racist. The despised and degraded outcast establishes a clear moral ascendancy through the force of his despair; and when produced on the *Quest* television series in 1963, this short one-act play certainly struck home. Questions were raised in the Alberta legislature, and there were demands that the programme itself be cancelled for showing this "most corrupt and immoral" drama.<sup>4</sup>

*The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* – ironically staged as part of the centennial celebrations in 1967 – extended this into an indictment of Canadian society as a whole, revealing the colonized (whites, who were using the occasion to affirm their national independence) as colonialists themselves. The treatment of Ryga's heroine illustrates the racism inherent in the system. The framework in the action is a law-court, in which Rita Joe is successively (and simultaneously) arraigned for vagrancy, prostitution, assault, and petty theft. Intercut memory-scenes illustrate her innocence

and victimization, indicating the complicity of all the whites – even the most well-meaning – in her eventual destruction. Her teacher at the reservation school, fearful of the natural vitality displayed by the Indian children, alienates Rita Joe by imposing artificial standards of poetry and decorum. The priest, who condemns self-assertion as pride and extols suffering, conditions her to accept injustice. A shopkeeper, who employs her at minimal wage, forces her to have sex with him to keep the job, then fires her anyway. Hunger and loneliness drive her to prostitution as the only way of surviving. When she is arrested, the magistrate, sympathetic but uncomprehending, applies the letter of the law. All contribute indirectly to her death – which occurs during a gang rape following the murder of her boyfriend, a young Indian activist – while a “white liberal folklore singer” turns her fate into a sentimental ballad.<sup>5</sup> The vicious thugs in the shadows are simply the logical outcome of supposedly “respectable” attitudes; and in the closing choral requiem, Rita Joe is given mythic status: her corpse symbolizing the plight of all young Indians, whose deaths had been reported in the Vancouver newspapers over the preceding years.

Through the trial format, the white society that sits in judgement is itself on trial; and Ryga pays special attention to the role of the church. As Rita Joe puts it, when she rejects the priest,

“long ago the white man comes with Bibles to talk to my people, who had the land. They talk for hundred years ...then we had all the Bibles, and the white man had our land.”<sup>6</sup>

Against this hypocritical religion is set the positive values of Indian tradition and their closeness to nature. Rita’s father, David Joe, is the embodiment of wisdom and inner dignity. And though his position is rejected by the young Indian activist who has been radicalized by mistreatment in the city, the play represents David Joe as an ideal. Indeed, the character of Rita Joe’s father had been closely modelled on Chief Dan George, the Indian actor who played the role in the first production. According to Ryga,

“when I met him he seemed in every way the tribal father, in the white man’s impressions of Indian life ...I appreciate his traditionalism; it’s a great thing if it could be incorporated into the

mainstream of Canadian life. I would say that my inclusion of the character into the play is really an inclusion of the man.”<sup>7</sup>

This was a first Canadian production to use a majority of Indian actors in the cast, even if the title role was played by a white actress and the play itself was equally unconventional in style. The fluidity of the shifts in time and sequence, the juxtapositioning of different spaces, together with the atmospheric music and a spiraling expressionistic set, gave the action the status of a dream. This corresponded to Ryga’s initial outline for the play, which referred to “a dream-nightmare type of movement and mood ...played on a series of planes.”<sup>8</sup> The imagistic brevity and dislocation of the scenes directly mirror the fragmented personality of someone caught, as Rita Joe is, between old traditions belonging to a simpler, vanished way of life and the abstracting complexities of a technological society: and one of Ryga’s subsequent film-script versions identifies the action as the almost instantaneous replay of a person’s life, which is popularly supposed to flash before a person’s eye’s in the moment of dying. Even though there is a chronological story at the root of the play – Rita Joe’s life from early childhood to violent death – there is very little in the way of a plot. Rather, the structure is one of interwoven images; and Ryga applied musical analogies to his drama, using terms like “ballad play” or “orchestrated composition”.

*The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was immensely influential. After its Vancouver Play house premiere, it was produced across the country, and at the National Arts Center in Ottawa. It reportedly had a noticeable effect on the Indian Affairs and Justice Ministers, while the then Prime Minister and the Premier of British Canada had themselves photographed with the cast after the opening performance. The reviews were reverential – more than one referred to it as “not just a play, but more an act of communion in which our own participation is inescapable”<sup>9</sup> –and it also gained an international reputation, winning an award for the best new production at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973. At that time *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* seemed a highly realistic treatment of the Indian. Ryga was widely felt to have given the Indians an authentic voice, presenting them as positive figures in a way that the native members of the cast identified with: in tune with the Canadian landscape – open to religious vision associated

with nature, not with Christianity – life-affirming. In fact in the play the Indian characters represent the antithesis of the dominant colonialising, industrial, materialistic, urban civilization, by which they are routinely condemned, raped and murdered. However, although sympathetic, Ryga's view was essentially romantic, still that of an outsider. From today's perspective the Indians in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* appear sanitized, idealized; and the poetic flash-backs to the innocent, Rousseauesque life of Rita and her father on the Reservation are undeniably sentimental.

Part of the reason for this shift of consciousness is that native communities have increasingly developed their own dramatic voice. During the 1980s, various theatre groups staged works directly based on aboriginal life and mythology: for instance, le Theatre de la Marmaille's *Umiate (The Collective Boat)*, or Vancouver Headlines Theatre's *No' Xya' (Our Footprints)*. These developed materialin cooperation with native communities, and although playing mainly to white audiences – or even, as in the case of the Montreal-based Theatre de la Marmaille, being composed of all -white actors – such projects fostered indigenous Inuit and Indian Theatre Companies.

*Our Footprints*, for example, developed out of “Power Play” workshops, modelled on Augusto Boal's “Theatre of the Oppressed”. The script was written by the Artistic Director of the Headlines Company, but in collaboration with members of the tribal council and a core group of native performers. Paralleling a land-claims case being heard before the British Columbia Supreme Court at the time, it was directly relevant to Indian concerns; while the production made striking use of native masks, ceremonial costumes and dances, as well as the symbolism of totem-poles. Initially designed for the local Indian community, it was then taken on tour through British Columbia and across Canada, with a tribal chief who had been one of the main witnesses in the Supreme Court case leading the discussions with the audience that followed each performance.

Issue-oriented, more directly educational projects have also helped to introduce native communities to Western theatre, as with public awareness programmes mounted in response to a 1986 North West Territories Task Force on Spousal Assault. A white Edmonton theatre director was employed to work with isolated communities in creating performances that would

act as catalyst for group discussion of the problem. Tribal meetings formed the basis for workshops, from which communal scripts were produced; and the only audiences were those in the native reservations. In one case there was an exciting Inuit performance group to work with: Tunniq Theatre, which had already created a piece showcasing traditional songs and activities of Inuit lives. In the other case, the director found that the Dene tribal language had no words for “drama”, “actor” or even “theatre”.<sup>10</sup> Yet, however successful as a process in social terms, it seems clear from the few reports that in each case the final product had been moulded by the white director’s expectations. Both scripts appear to have been basically naturalistic, kitchen-sink dramas.

So the influence, although limited, seems to have been to some extent reciprocal. Standard Canadian theatre styles are being introduced to native communities, and applied to their immediate concerns – while white audiences have been exposed to traditional types of native performance, as well as to dramatic material created by the natives themselves. And the point of intersection with the highest profile has been a Toronto-based Indian theatre company: Native Earth Performing Arts, whose Artistic Director Tompson Highway, has become one of Canada’s leading playwrights.

Tompson Highway’s aim is specifically to promote this kind of inter-penetration. In his view, “white culture in Canada is very much changing and transforming as a result of living with native culture; likewise Cree culture, native culture”; and he sees his drama as “searching for this new voice, this new identity ...this magical transformation” of society.<sup>11</sup> Working through Native Earth – which is dedicated to developing a professional group of Indian performers and providing a vehicle for new native work – Highway is very much the proof of his own assertions, even if (so far) the only one.

He attended James Reaney’s workshops at the University of Western Ontario, during the collective creation of *The Donnellys* trilogy, and acknowledges Reaney’s impact on his own drama, while his first success – *The Rez Sisters* (“Rez” being slang for “Indian Reservation”) – was clearly modelled on an early play by Quebec’s leading dramatist, Michael

Tremblay's *Less Belles Soeurs*.<sup>12</sup> But the Canadian dramatist he most resembles is George Ryga.

Growing up on a reservation in northern Manitoba, Highway's early experience must have duplicated that observed by Ryga in northern Alberta; and like Ryga, he stresses his position as an outsider. Where Ryga defined himself in opposition to mainstream Anglo-society as a Ukrainian immigrant and a radical socialist, Highway distinguishes himself by emphasizing his Indian roots and his homosexuality. As he put it: "what I appreciate about my sexuality is that it gives me the status of an outsider. And as a native, I am an outsider in a double sense. That gives you a wider vision..."<sup>13</sup> Like Ryga too, Highway's central concern is developing a viable national mythology for Canada as a whole, out of the experience of a marginalized sub-class – the only essential difference being that here it is drawn from traditional native beliefs and imagery, rather than from a white proletarian folk-culture. And his two major plays have had an exactly equivalent impact to Ryga's Indian plays twenty five years earlier: immediate recognition, controversial success, performance at the Edinburgh Festival, and the official accolade of a National Arts Centre production in Ottawa.

Of course, the tone of Highway's plays is very different. Frequently satiric, he adds physical farce to the poetic evocation and serious social themes that characterized Ryga's work. And writing from within the Indian experience, Highway avoids the sentimentality that Ryga was prone to. Although both affirm the intrinsic dignity of the Indian, Ryga does so by establishing confrontational superiority, or perpetuating the noble savage stereotype. Indeed the actor Dan George went on from his part as the venerable father of Rita Joe to make a career as the whiteman's image of conventional Indian nobility in films like *Little Big Man*. By contrast, *The Rez Sisters* – Highway's most obvious attempt to (in his words) rehabilitate "a people for whom simple human dignity has long been owing"<sup>14</sup> – presents a group of seven women from the semi-imaginary Wasaychigan Indian Reserve as down-to-earth, extraordinary if highly idiosyncratic people. Their value comes from their warmth; and as another Canadian playwright, Carol Bolt, put it, the degree of identification achieved by the play makes an audience feel part of "an extraordinary, exuberant, life-

affirming family.”<sup>15</sup> But perhaps the most significant distinction from Rygais that Highway’s work is not directly political. Their ideology may be comparable: where Ryga attacks a hierarchic capitalistic system, Highway’s target is a patriarchal colonialist society. But he never deals with the conflict between White and Indian. (Indeed, up to this point, none of his plays has even included a direct relationship between the two. Even in *The Rez Sisters*, where the native women’s goal is a Bingo game in Toronto, the place of the white Bingo Master is taken by an Indian mythological figure (the Trickster). Instead, Highway demonstrates the effects on the subjugated in order to foster awareness among those responsible for subjugating them; and the change he works for is not political but conceptual:

“Canadian society can gain a lot by looking at native theology. Myths define society and we need to break down the ones that oppress people, whether they’re women, or homosexuals, or minorities.”<sup>16</sup>

However, defining an alternative mythology, based on the experience of the exploited, is itself an aim that links Highway with Ryga, even if their beliefs come from radically different cultures. And where this is most explicit, in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*,<sup>17</sup> there are distinct parallels to *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.

*Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* is set in exactly the same location as *The Rez Sisters*: the Wasaychgan reserve (“Wasaychgan” means “window” in Cree, and for Highway the name has some of the same resonance as Wessex in Thomas Hardy’s novels – a mythical transformation of a recognizable real place). However, in the latter play marginality is even more strongly emphasized. The “Rez” Women set out for the big metropolis of Toronto. By contrast the only place Dry Lips (the ironic name of the woman organizing an all-female ice-hockey team) can be conceived of going is Kapuskasing; and Kapuskasing is an actual place, a small Ontario backwoods settlement. It represents the most isolated and out-of-the-way community imaginable, making the inhabitants of the reservation marginalized even by the standards of even the least significant outsiders.

On one level a counter-play to *The Rez Sisters*, in *Dry Lips* seven male characters replace the seven women, and there is almost a complete contrast in tone. In *Dry Lips*, the affirmative comedy of the earlier play has been exchanged for aggressive violence: even though the characterization still contains a great deal of humour, it tends towards the grotesque. In *The Rez Sisters* the only non-female personification is the spirit-figure of “Nanbush” (the Ojibway name for “the Trickster”: according to Highway a sort of universal common denominator in Indian legend, whose nature has been interpreted in many different ways by various tribes).<sup>18</sup> There, played by a dancer – Tompson Highway’s brother – Nanabush appears not only as the Bingo Master, but (dressed in white feathers) as a seagull and (in a black-feathered costume) as a night-hawk: birds of the soul and of death in Indian mythology. By contrast in the masculine context of *Dry Lips* this Nanabush deity represents the archetypal female, or rather perhaps the object of male fantasies. The same actress takes the parts of all four women characters, as well as a transsexual Jehova-caricature, donning “a gigantic pair of false rubberized breasts” or “an oversized prosthetic bum” over her bosom and buttocks for all these female figures.

The single-sex cast of human characters makes each play gender-specific; and in *Dry Lips* the main theme is sexual abuse which links up with the community theatre projects in the North West Territories, as well as echoing *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. The dramatic climax of *Dry Lips* is very close to Ryga’s.

In Highway’s earlier play, one of the Rez sisters has adopted a girl, who suffered permanent mental damage from being raped with a screwdriver by a pair of white youths. (According to Highway this was based on a true incident, though the actual girl had her eyes gouged out to prevent her identifying the rapists, and froze to death before she was found.) Only an incidental reference in *The Rez Sisters*, this becomes the central on-stage action of *Dry Lips* except that here the rapist is not white, but another Indian; and it is he, not the girl, who is mentally retarded, having been left mute, and infantile from fetal alcohol syndrome. Although this switch disguises the background similarity to *Rita Joe*, other changes reinforce the parallel. As with Ryga’s victim,

there are bystanders who voyeuristically participate in the rape; and it is accompanied by the killing of the girl's lover, who (as in *Rita Joe*) is a young Indian activist representing the only possibility of cultural survival for the native people.

But where *Dry Lips* duplicates Ryga's play most closely is in its dramaturgy and use of a dream framework. Trained as a concert pianist, Highway also refers to his drama in musical terms, talking about "applying sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk." Like *Rita Joe*, *Dry Lips* is designed for multi-level action, with a fluid interchange of scenes within a single setting, while the plot is fragmented and comprises a series of flashbacks. These include the retarded teenager's birth on top of a jukebox in a bar – which is possibly a projection from within his own mind, since it offers the only comprehensible explanation for his motive in the rape. Perhaps indicating a confusion in his thoughts between Christ bleeding on the cross and his mother's sordid labour, the scene is juxtaposed with the Biblical rantings of his uncle (symbolically named Spooky Lacroix) – which in turn is set against the rejection of Christian dogma by the young activist and his girl, who argue for a return to traditional native values.

The level of reality is frequently unclear. The play, which begins with one of the men lying naked and dead drunk on a couch, returns him to this position at the end. Within this frame of "external" reality, the rape and murder has only been a nightmarish dream. Even the off-stage tribal women's insistence on forming a female ice-hockey team – which has brought out the men's sexism by taking over a uniquely masculine preserve, and thus threatening male authority – becomes dismissed as fantasy. To the awakened dreamer it is the "damn silliest thing I heard in my life."<sup>19</sup> Nothing has actually happened at all; and we are left with the closing image of an idealized Indian family group. This could be seen as a copout – one of the few criticisms in the applauding reviews of the play – undermining the seriousness of its social criticism. But for Highway, the sort of circular dream-structure pioneered by Ryga embodies a specific philosophy. It corresponds to "the way the Cree look at life. A continuous cycle. A self-rejuvenating force. By comparison, Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering, and then the apocalypse."<sup>20</sup> Thus the play's

circular action is intended as a positive antidote to the self-destructive degradation portrayed in it; and Highway also emphasized that “dreams – and the dream-life – have traditionally been considered by native society to be the greatest tool of instruction.”<sup>21</sup>

Where Highway goes far beyond Ryga, writing twenty-five years later and in the midst of revelations about child-abuse by priests teaching in Catholic schools (like the one he himself attended), is in his attack on Christianity. Uncompromisingly presented as the epitome of patriarchal colonialism, and of the distorting linear thought-patterns of white culture, it is primarily responsible for the current degradation of the native population. The retarded youth’s mother uses a crucifix to beat him with, and it replaces the screwdriver of the earlier story as the instrument with which he assaults the girl. The rather over-obvious symbolism exactly mirrors Highway’s convictions. “The missionaries made such a mess of things”, he told an interviewer after *Dry Lips* reached the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto:

“In the rape scene, a woman is raped with a crucifix. On a metaphorical level, the scene symbolized the matriarchal [Indian] religion raped by the patriarchy, the Goddess raped by God. Until the central symbol of the crucifix is not central in our society, women will always be second class citizens [Like the Natives]”<sup>22</sup>

And to add insult to this attack on Christianity, when one of the characters curses “God-Alfucking-mighty!” after discovering the dying youth, we get a vision that is both scatological and blasphemous:

“a light comes up on Nanabush...sitting on a toilet having a good shit. He/she is dressed in an old man’s white beard and wig, but also wearing sexy, elegant women’s high-heeled pumps. Surrounded by white, puffy clouds, she/he sits with her legs crossed, nonchalantly filing his/her fingernails.”<sup>23</sup>

Together with the graphically perverted quality of the rape, and the sympathetic treatment of even the most chauvinistic males in the play – which led to complaints of misogyny – this treatment of holy icons could hardly be better calculated to outrage more conventionally-minded white spectators. And the play was aimed at a primarily white audience.

Like Highway's previous works, *The Rez Sisters* was initially mounted in the Native Earth Performing Arts space, attended almost exclusively by Indians. It had been workshopped on the Manatoulin Island Reserve, and was designed to address a native public. As one Toronto reviewer commented, it came "out of nowhere"<sup>24</sup> to win a prestigious award, followed by a sold-put national tour. After that, though still performed by an all-native cast, *Dry Lips* opened as a co-production between Native Earth and Theatre PasseMuraille, one of the regular Torontotheatres. It then moved to successfully more establishment stages, including the National Arts Centre, ending up as a part of a subscription series in the Royal Alexandra, possibly the most bourgeois theatre in Canada. And the change of tone between the two plays is a clear response to the difference in intended audience. Where the *The Rez Sisters* worked for identification with the characters – to the extent of involving spectators in the Bingo game and handing out a \$20 prize to a winner in the audience each night – *Dry Lips* was deliberately confrontational. Warnings about nudity and obscenity were posted in the lobby; and although first-night reviewers applauded, many spectators were upset. My own observations correspond to one Toronto critic, who commented that the Royal Alex audience "seemed stunned and pretty unhappy... A lot of seats were empty for the second act, and a well-dressed woman in the washroom commented, 'I don't know how they can allow them on the stage'..." Even Highway acknowledged that the play might be "easily misunderstood."<sup>25</sup> As he said, "a lot of people missed" the positive significance of Hera Keechigeesik (the name of the one real-life Indian woman, the sleeping man's wife who appears briefly after the end of the dream).<sup>26</sup> Apparently this name was meant to signal "the return of the goddess", Hera being the queen of heaven in Greek mythology, and Keechigeesik the Great Sky in Cree legend.<sup>27</sup> Acrane indeed and hardly enough to offset the overall approach to the audience, which was in some ways the theatrical equivalent to Mapplethorpe's notoriously shocking photographs.

At the least it raises questions about Highway's proclaimed intention to transform Canadian society by amalgamating white and native cultures. Indeed, if one seriously credits his proposition about linear versus circular thought patterns, then the two traditions are mutually exclusive. This may perhaps explain the underlying antagonism – but that in turn undermines

his less ambitious aim: to “provoke society to re-examine itself.”<sup>28</sup> Antagonizing the public tends to be counterproductive, as the experience of political playwrights elsewhere has demonstrated.

Beyond this, the examples of Ryga and Highway raise wider questions about cross-culturalism. Despite giving his play a specifically Indian Rationale, the striking similarities between *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* implies that Highway has had to adopt a non-native style in order to reach the general Canadian public. Theatre itself, as the North West Territories project indicated, has no equivalent in Indian tradition; and form, of course, conditions content. On the one hand, it is hard to see how any Indian writing in English can avoid using alien literary forms. And as public art, in a way that poetry or even the novel is not, with set physical parameters, theatre is more codified. Drama automatically imposes some elements of the European world view out of which it evolved. Alternatively, when aboriginal dances or ceremonial rites are transposed to the stage, they become folkloric.

Such considerations return us to the issue of marginality in general: particularly the effect when the marginal is acclaimed by the mainstream, and the outsider finds himself standing in the centre. Ryga had already shown himself aware of the inherent problem; for an author whose aim is to change public consciousness, immediate popularity is suspect, and success can mean social absorption – any uncomfortable message being glossed over, like an irritant in an oyster. As Ryga expressed it in an early draft of his next play after *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*:

“- Work is always important...

-I’m not so sure – A buddy of mine wrote a play about an Indian girl who is murdered in the city of white man’s indifference...

- Such plays have been written...

— But this one was a sell-out! [in both senses, of course: a commercial success – as *Rita Joe* had become – and a corrupting compromise.] The best entertainment on stage that winter! People paid... five dollars to witness on stage what takes place in life every night in the downtown part of their city!...”<sup>29</sup>

And the conclusion reached in this thinly disguised self-questioning, is that at best, the applause absolves the audience from any need to actually do something about the situation. The reality has been subsumed in drama.

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## **In Search of an Alternative Modernist Aesthetics: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber***

**Arnab Chatterjee**

Very few scholars pay attention to the highly experimental dramaturgy of Rabindranath Tagore which is truly 'modern' in Tagorean sense as he believed that to be modern is to be self-reliant. If experimentation in terms of the modes of representation is the defining feature of modernism, then Tagore's theatre is a truly 'modern' theatre. Were Tagore's experimentations grafted under the rubric of the Western modernist aesthetics? Did he come up with an alternative version of modernism Indian in spirit? Did he decolonize the culture of theatre in India through an alternative facet of modernism and theory of performance? This paper will attempt a critical response to the aforementioned questions with close textual analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber* (1910) which is often deemed as a 'soul-drama'. This play refuses to submit to any category and is marked by plurality of meaning instead of providing the singular authority of monopolizing meaning. Sisirkumar Ghose rightly comments: "he (Tagore) has been hailed as the father of modern Indian stagecraft (*Svakiya natyadarshan o manchabhavana*)" (61).

1910 is a very important date not merely in the context of the discussion on modernism but in Tagore's career with his negotiations between genres as we see the emergence of his three texts *Raja*, *Gora* and *Gitanjali*. He wrote the personal lyric, the allegorical play and the socio-cultural novel in the same year. By this time the Western thinkers posited a sense of rupture within the self and lamented over the nature of fragmented existence of modern life marked by urban ennui. In her oft-cited essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924) Virginia Woolf declared " ... in or

around December 1910, human character changed... All human relations have shifted –those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910”<sup>1</sup> (251-52). The artists were under the impression that they underwent conspicuous epistemological and ontological changes in comparison to that of the preceding Victorian age and they grappled with the problematic of artistic representation. More or less most of the European thinkers accepted that newness in techniques is essential as the earlier configurations of living did not exist, except George Lukacs who talked about the efficacy of realism and the renunciation of modernism in works like *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* and *Studies in European Realism*. Tagore had his own views on modernism. In “Adhunik Kavya” (Modern Poetry) he stated that “I have been requested to write something on the modern foreign poets. The task is not easy. Because, who will determine the boundary of the modern matching with the calendar? It is more a matter of thought than of time”<sup>2</sup>(101). In this essay he demonstrated that the way of seeing the universe as formless and as it is instead of seeing the universe from personal motivation is the sole definition of what constitutes the ‘modern’ for him (113). The whole of the ‘universe’ as formless and depersonalized is the view of the king as it appears in *The King of the Dark Chamber*.

*The King of the Dark Chamber* has been described by Tagore scholars as a ‘metaphysical play’ or a thesis play or a soul drama. This kind of formulaic categorization limits the possibilities of multiple layers of meanings within the play. Many readers and audiences of the play grapple with the problem of arriving at a definite meaning of the play. So like many modernist texts it shares the accusations of being inscrutable and incomprehensible and thus oriented towards what Roland Barthes terms ‘writerly’ rather than readerly text. Tagore dealt with different genres with extreme fluency when he was writing *The King of the Dark Chamber* and explored the dichotomy between sensuality and spirituality, recognized the dualities of life and revealed a remarkably flexible mind to accept these dualities. Among the multiple readings that the play can generate, the most common reading is to view the play as a ‘soul’ drama where a

quest for divinity is skillfully presented resulting in Sudarshana's transcendent transformation and acceptance of the King as formless. If we can remember his idea of approaching the formless universe not through personal subjective lens in "Adhunik Kavya", we can analyze that notion is embodied in Sudarshana's journey from ignorance to wisdom and her ultimate acceptance of the formless King with a spiritual realization. The problem with Sudarshana is to see the darkness around her in a monologic discourse and to search for a subjectivised form of the King. Though she cannot see the King in darkness, Surangama knows the truth and searches beyond the literal meaning of 'darkness'. Krishna Kripalaini rightly points out:

The poet was in a full frenzy of the dramatic phase of his career and it was inevitable that he should dramatize the most intense experience of his life-his adventure with the Divine. He had sought God in beauty and had found him in sorrow. Is Truth merely Beauty and Goodness or is it also terrible? What is the soul's relation to God? Must we approach Truth on its own terms or on ours? These are the questions the poet has sought to answer in this his most symbolic and in a sense his most characteristic play, *Raja*. Several critics, even in his own country, have found fault with Tagore's plays on account of their symbolism, their excessive lyricism and the introduction of wayside scenes and characters not strictly relevant to the plot. They apply to his plays standards learnt from their study of the Western, in particular, the English drama, forgetting that Tagore sought neither to follow any known models nor to cater to any standardized public taste. He created his own forms as well as his own public (210-11).

It is really difficult to associate Tagore with Yeats or Materlinck vis-à-vis symbolism as symbols are rooted in Indian culture and history. *The King of the Dark Chamber* posits a different kind of reality. It is an altogether alternative order of reality which cannot be looked at only in terms of time and space. It is included within its cultural ambience and also goes beyond it through the use of symbolism. There is an extensive use of symbols in this play and of course, the main symbol is the King. Other symbols like 'dark chamber', 'fire' and 'sunrise' are also related to

the King. The 'dark chamber' makes us aware of the darkness in and around us and renders the darkness 'visible' to the audience. The 'fire' seems to be burning but ultimately leads to purification. Sudarshana has to move through fire to realize what the King is and here the 'fire' acts as a process of purifying one's own self. She cries "This fire will never cease-will never cease" (108). The remarkable use of symbols provides new dimensions of meaning to the other visual symbols. Sudarshana's journey is part of the idea of the psychic idea of quest in a Romantic sense. The king may be seen as Sudarshana's second self making the readers/audience to the modernism's Romantic journey<sup>3</sup> when at a connotative level it may refer to the quest for one's own self. Roland Barthes rightly pointed out in his *Elements of Semiology*: "a connoted system is a system whose plane of expression is itself constituted by a signifying system" (92). The 'darkness' in *The King of the Dark Chamber* performs a polyphonic function in Bakhtinian sense. According to Bakhtin:

The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through. Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure, that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally. And this is so because dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life- in general, everything that has meaning and significance. (40)

Though Bakhtin used the term in the context of the novel, I think it can be applied to the literary or cultural artefacts as the novel for him was not a rigid genre but a worldview. However the conversation between Sudarshana and Surangama brings out the dialogic nature of the 'darkness'.

*Sudarshana*: Light, light! Where is light? Will the lamp never be lighted in this chamber?

*Surangama*: My Queen, all your other rooms are lighted- will you never long to escape from the light into a dark room like this?

*Sudarshana*: But why should this room be kept dark?

*Surangama*: Because otherwise you would know neither light nor darkness.(39)

Surangama knows the darkness has the propensity to become light. It is never possible to reach the light bypassing darkness. One needs to come out of the frenzied and intoxicated state to realize the infinite within the finite. Sudarshana's journey from darkness to light ends when the King says: "I open the doors of this dark room to-day- the game is finished here! Come, come with me now, come outside-into *the light*" (199). The king being disembodied and unseen encapsulates both the darkness and light. It is the darkness that envelopes our day to day life that sends a signal to go beyond it. Tagore consciously adopted this symbol within the larger allegorical structure of the play as allegory is simultaneous thinking of the other things that may be opposite in nature.

The King is dark too as he is black. Sudarshana describes the King as:

Terrible,- oh, it was terrible! I am afraid even to think of it again. Black, black-oh, thou art black like everlasting night! I only looked on thee for one dreadful instant. The blaze of the fire fell on your features- you looked like the awful night when a comet swings fearfully into our ken-oh, then I closed my eyes- I could not look on you any more. Black as the threatening storm-cloud, black as the shoreless sea with the spectral red tint of twilight on its tumultuous waves. (110)

Like most of the modernist writers Tagore took recourse to 'mythical method'<sup>4</sup>as the source of the play can be traced back to the *Jataka* tale where the King who looks very ugly meets his consort in darkness. Though this Buddhist backdrop was again taken up by Tagore in *Shapmochan* (1931)<sup>4</sup>, this story gets a new dimension in *The king of the Dark Chamber* where there is a beauty of comprehending darkness beyond which light lies. The masterstroke is given by Tagore when he shows the King as invisible yet all pervasive. Shantidev Ghosh has noted two more possible sources of the play- the curse of the Guru on Urbashi in the play *Bikromurboshi* and the story of Usha –Aniruddha in *Padmapuran* (112-18). Through the multifaceted connotations of the King, Tagore explored a number of interesting things which apparently seem to be at loggerhead with each other. On one hand the King stands for the divine and this

reading corroborates with Tagore's concept of the *nirakar brahma* (shapeless God). If one keeps aside the spiritual inflections of the play, it is possible to have some secular interpretations. The King may be seen as Tagore's idea of *Jivandevata* and also the totality of life which consist of both the darkness and the light. He is also the symbol of good governance and through him Tagore foregrounds a political allegory of a tolerant kind of administrative system. Edward Thompson opines: "*Raja* shows with striking intensity what may be called his republicanism... His plays have plenty of kings; but they are usually abdicating, or wanting to abdicate, or in the end learn to abdicate-that is, true kings, the Kinglets often being rascals, mere foils for their overlord's virtue. The King in *Raja* refuses to exercise any of the ordinary prerogatives of Kingship, to punish treason or resent insult". Thompson's reading on the political allegory of the play sidelined the whole idea of meeting the Supreme Being through utter devotion or enmity which is firmly rooted in Indian mythology. There is an opposition between the King and Kanchi. At the end no antagonism exists between the King and Kanchi as Kanchi says: "Queen mother, I see you two on this road! I am a traveller of the same path as yourself. Have no fear of me, O Queen" (191). Love is prioritized over rivalry. Against the goodness of the King Tagore alerts us to the possibilities of a false king like Subarna and a lustful king like Avanti. At one point in the play Kanchi says: "what manner of governing a country is this? The king is having a festival in a forest, where even the meanest and commonest people can have easy access!" (59). When Sudarshana asks Surangama whether the King had "punished the prisoners with death", Surangama replies "Death? My King never punishes with death" (118). In an essay "Rabindranather rastranaitik mat" (The Political Opinion of Rabindranath) (1929) Tagore said: The Country belonged to the people; the King was only part of it, as the crown is part of the head" (qtd. in Sen 510). One can easily locate from the aforementioned words of Kanchi that the King of the play exactly embodied this political opinion.

When most of the characters doubt the king, only Surangama and the Grandfather show unflinching faith in him. This is quite evident when she says: "May he ever remain hard and relentless like rock- may my tears and prayers never move him! Let my sorrows be ever mine only-

and may his glory and victory be for ever!” (129). Actually in Tagore’s mindset the strings of personal losses prevail and he tried to transcend the personal grief in search of the grater truth. Grandfather seems to show the same kind of faith when he says: “I have known him now- I have known him through my griefs and joys- he can make me weep no more” (174). Yet in the play we find that Surangama too undergoes a crisis. At one point she says: “If he can leave us like that, then we have no need of him. Then he does not exist for us; then that dark chamber is totally empty and void- no *vina* ever breathed its music there-none called you or me in that chamber; then everything has been a delusion and an idle dream” (146). In India Tagore did not face the same kind of crisis that the overly materialistic West faced. Thus he fell back upon Indian concept of ‘faith’ which dissolves the state of indeterminacy. The play does not end in crisis as we see in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* where Godot never comes. Indian ideology and culture provided Tagore a resource to continue the play even after Sudarshana’s crisis as he knew Faith was the key concept of his culture. Sudarshana says: “what a relief, Surangama, what freedom! It is my defeat that has brought me freedom ...” (186). She learns to differentiate between appearance and reality and finds the King in the inscape of her mind. She is not an abstraction for her but a living character. Getting annoyed over the criticism of Brajendra Babu in 1914 on 13th November Tagore wrote a letter to Dinabandhu Andrews stating “The character of the Queen so absorbed me that I could think of nothing else for days. It was a living soul going through an agony of conflict and entering at last into peace, a soul living that I knew her intimately and could almost speak with her” (qtd. in Bhattacharya 75)

Tagore’s use of songs in the play is interesting as the songs are often used as an extension of dialogue. The emotion becomes so intense that speech becomes songs. The prose of modernist literature often became poetic. Tagore can make the door open through music. The role of the Grandfather in the play seems to serve as the role of the *vivek* in indigenous *jatra* tradition who sings a number of songs during the performance. Tagore’s preference for *jatra* is seen in his essay “Rangamancha”: “I like *jatra* for this very reason. Its performance does not maintain a strict distance between spectator and actor. They trust and help each other and

the job is done well in a cordial setting. Assisted by performance, the poetry, which is the real thing, flows over the thrilled hearts of the spectators like a fountain” (97). In his search for parallel theatre, he had often drawn upon the indigenous performing arts and created his own theatre. It is not surprising therefore to see a character like the Grandfather who acted as the *vivek*. Here the indigenous tradition is prioritized over the modernist sensibility. Though the play was not considered initially as stage worthy, the Indian theatre has witnessed several successful productions of the play.

The views of Surnagama, Sudarshana, Kanchi, the Grandfather and the Crowd regarding the King, his presence/absence represent the insistence of modernism on the difference of each individual’s experience and interpretation of life. The play constantly foregrounds the inner subjectivity rejecting the principle of verisimilitude. But Tagore’s engagement with the modernist sensibility did not install a paradigm of new westernization in the shape of modernism. Though he revolted against tradition, he turned back to the indigenous resources to search the roots of his identity. In *The King of the Dark Chamber*, the inward journey of the divided self of Surangama resembles the explorations of the fragmented self of the modernist writers. What differentiates her journey from the Western kind is the centralization of the idea of ‘faith’ in Indian culture. Some techniques of modernism are used to reaffirm Indian values and culture. The influence of modernism on Tagore is literary rather than social or political. He rejected the past tradition and at the same time drew upon the indigenous performing arts. While the modern West showed little faith in mysticism, he created a version of alternative modernist aesthetics where the Indian mystic tradition and idea of political governance can be accommodated without any conflict through the use of allegory.

**Notes:**

1. This was originally read as a paper to the Heretics at Cambridge on 18 May, 1924. A version titled “character in Fiction” was published in *The Criterion* II, 8 (July 1924), and the revised version as a pamphlet at the Hogarth Press in 1924.

2. Translation mine. see “Adunik Kavya” included in “Sahityaer Pathe” published by Granthanbibhag, Kolkata
3. Of course I have in mind Arup Rudra’s book *Modernism’s Romantic Journey* (Calcutta: Dhur 1991)
4. T.S. Eliot used the term for the works of W.B. Yeats in “Ulysses, Order and Myth”
5. The striking departure in *Shapmochan* (1931) from *The King of the Dark Chamber* is physical presence of the King on stage. This is perhaps because of the practical concerns of staging as here Tagore experimented with dance as the medium of theatrical expression.

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## **From Page to Stage: Performing *By the Tungabhadra* in the Theatre**

**Raj Raj Mukhopadhyay**

The eminent novelist of Bengali literature Saradindu Bandyopadhyay (1899-1970) received the ‘Rabindra Puraskar’ (the highest literary award given by Government of West Bengal) in 1967, for his well-acclaimed historical romance *By the Tungabhadra* (1965). Besides enriching the genre of historical fiction, he was a versatile litterateur who tried his hand in ghost stories and detective fiction; creating some popular characters like Baroda, the ghost-hunter, Byomkesh Bakshi, the sleuth and Sadashiv, the adolescent hero. Probably, Saradindu’s personal experience as a screenplay writer at the film industry in Bombay (currently Mumbai) had developed his skill in adapting and reshaping texts. His *Jhinder Bondi* (1939), a tale of adventure and romance is an artistic remodelling of Anthony Hope’s novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894). In fact, his *Kumarsambhaber Kobi* (1963) is a literary adaptation of his erstwhile screenplay, *Kalidasa* (1943). Indeed, many of Saradindu’s novels and stories have been adapted into popular motion pictures. Tapan Sinha’s direction of *Jhinder Bondi* (1961), Satyajit Ray’s *Chiriyakhana* (1966) featuring famous hero Uttam Kumar in the lead role, and *Dadar Kirti* (1980) directed by Tarun Majumdar are some of the foremost movies that were based on his novels. In the last two decades, renowned directors like Anjan Dutt, Rituparno Ghosh and Arindam Sil have adapted several of his Byomkesh stories for the silver screen. In Hindi media, notable adaptations include a television series from 1993 to 1997 which starred Rajit Kapur as Byomkesh Bakshi, and the Bollywood movie *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy!* (2015) directed by Dibakar Banerjee, starring Sushant Singh Rajput as the main performer. Nevertheless, the degree of considerable attempts in adapting Saradindu’s historical romances either

for cinema or theatrical space is minimal. It is with the praiseworthy venture of ‘Krishti’, a Kolkata based theatre group, that *By the Tungabhadra* is being presented on the stage for the past couple of years. Their assiduous endeavours have brought this play under public attention and received critical acclaim from the sophisticated audiences.

The journey of staging *By the Tungabhadra* (‘Tungabhadrar Teere’ in Bengali) began in 2018, when Dr. Sitangshu Khatua, a theatre enthusiast currently working as a Professor of Finance in Heritage Business School, Kolkata planned to enact the dramatic version of Saradindu’s magnum opus. But an accurate representation of a twentieth-century historical novel involves certain inevitable complications which are difficult to overcome. Daniel Fischlin and Marc Fortier have observed:

Theatrical adaptation is an intertextual apparatus, a system of relations and citations not only between verbal texts, but between singing and speaking bodies, lights, sounds, movements, and all other cultural elements at work in theatrical production. (7)

In his book *Theory of the Film* (1953), Béla Balázs asserts that a script-writer, while staging his play can “use the existing work of art merely as raw material, regard it from the specific angle of his own art form as it were raw reality, and pay no attention to the form once already given to the material” (263). In Siegfried Kracauer’s view, the idea of correspondence between literary text and its film adaptation is shrouded with abstruse theory. He opines that “adaptability of a novel depends not so much on its exclusive devotion to the material world as on its orientation towards contents which still fall into the dimensions of psychophysical correspondence” (241-42). However, the category of dimension, which Kracauer states is completely arbitrary. One should contemplate that the purpose of theatre, unlike cinema, is not to emphasize the redemption of physical reality but to transfigure the abstract sphere of responsive texts into a tangible domain. Khatua has meticulously crafted the script of his play, focusing on Saradindu’s original text as a “raw” substance that can be modified and remoulded. His play has been staged more than fifteen times till date. The first performance of *By the Tungabhadra* took place on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2018 at Uttam Mancha auditorium in Kalighat, Kolkata.

The obligatory legal right was taken from Smt. Sananda Chakraborty, the granddaughter-in-law of the author. Under the direction of Sitangshu Khatua, the stage design was made by Kneel Koushik, make-up artists were Md. Ali and Sanjay Pal, stage-lighting done by Bablu Sarkar, background score composed by Kalyan Sarkar, choreography and martial art were devised by Amrapali Dasgupta and Arkadip Ghosh. The casting included Sujay Raaj Maitra in the role of Arjunvarma, Gandharvi Khatua as Bidyunmala, Sitangshu Khatua as King Devaraya, Aindrila Ghosh as Manikankana and the character of Balaram Karmakar was played by Avigyan Khatua. Other minor roles were performed by Subrata Barman, Chalantika Gangopadhyay, Shanta Roy Choudhury, Suparna Khatua, Prabir Dasgupta, Shounak Pal, Tanmoy Adhikary, Sanjeeb Sinha and Pradyot Moulik. To a great extent, this cast has remained almost unchanged so far with minor alterations. The staging received appreciation from both critics and spectators. *The Times of India* newspaper on 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2018 wrote

Krishti theatre group on Sunday staged one of its most ambitious plays– Sharadindu Bhandyopadhyay’s immortal historical fiction ‘Tungabhadrar Teere’. Last year, the group had adapted ‘Antigone’. The premiere was held at the Uttam Manch. ...Prof Sitangshu Khatua from Krishti said, “The novel is extremely visual and even cinematic. It was a big challenge to adapt it for stage. I made some minor changes in the screenplay and sent it to the copyright holder of Sharadindu’s works for approval.”

*Ei Samay* newspaper on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2018 wrote:

The arrogance of power or political intrigues cannot destroy the relation of heart. Since ages, the ever-continuing war goes on between the downtrodden, underprivileged and the tyrant. History speaks of this war. The sky, air and river stand as witnesses. . . . Director Sitangshu Khatua and the thespians of ‘Krishti’ dared to dramatize the novel and represent it in the theatrical format. Recently, it has been staged in Uttam Mancha. Krishti brought back that epoch of history before the spectators through appropriate and creative costume, stagecraft, lighting, ambiance, dance and characterization. (my trans.)

The next staging took place on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2018 at Tapan Theatre in Kalighat, Kolkata. On 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2018, the news of the upcoming performance was published in the digital version of *Anandabazar Patrika*<sup>1</sup>,

Krishti started its journey in 2012. . . . Tomorrow, the third staging of this new play is at Tapan Theatre. But, why ‘Tungabhadrar Teere’ all of a sudden? Director Sitangshu Khatua says, “I wanted to work on historical fiction. And this task is very challenging. The way in which Saradindu Bandyopadhyay has written Tungabhadrar Teere; with scenes of storm, boat, and river – these were difficult to present on the stage.” (my trans.)

The print version of ABP had also published a review on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2018. The digital version of *Zee 24 Ghanta* news channel reported<sup>2</sup> the forthcoming dramatic show on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2018. This widespread circulation and positive reviews about Krishti’s production encouraged the troupe to conduct public staging in various auditoriums of Kolkata. The play was enacted at Minerva Theatre in Beadon Street, Kolkata on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2018 and 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2018; in Academy of Fine Arts on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2018; at Madhusudan Mancha in Dhakuria, Kolkata on 17<sup>th</sup> August, 2018; two productions at Gyan Mancha, Pretoria Street on 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2018 and 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2019; further performances were at Tapan Theatre on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2018, 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2018 and 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2019. The drama was telecasted by Doordarshan Kendra, Kolkata on 19<sup>th</sup> August, 2019. Public performances outside the metropolis include invited staging at the Library Hall in Shantipur, Nadia on 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2018; at Srijani Auditorium, City Centre in Durgapur on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2018; and on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2019 at Srijani Shilpagram, Santiniketan in a drama festival organized by EZCC. These dramatic performances also received appreciation from critics and theatre-goers across the state. An article written by Chinmoy Gargari, appraising the show of 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2018 was published in the *Bartaman Patrika* on 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2018. Sukomal Ghosh reviewed the production and published a critical write-up in *Anandabazar Patrika* on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2018.

However, the exclusive charm of the play neither lies in its extensive stage-production nor in its approbative commentaries, but the way in

which the director has reframed the original narrative of Saradindu's novel. In his dramatic adaptation of *By the Tungabhadra*, Khatua has interestingly diverged from the central motif of socio-religious antagonism in the novel to a more pointed representation of class-struggle. His dramatization is imbued with socialist musing, the relentless struggle between haves and have-nots where King Devaraya, the embodiment of autocracy fights with Arjunvarma, who becomes the epitome of the plebeians. Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) writes:

There is a difference between never wanting a story to end...and wanting to retell the same story over and over in different ways. With adaptations, we seem to desire the repetition as much as the change. Maybe this is why...adaptation is a "derivative work" – that is based on one or more preexisting works, but "recast, transformed".  
(9)

In Saradindu's novel, the story ends with prosperous marriages between the loving couples; Arjunvarma and Bidyunmala, Devaraya and Manikankana, Balaram and Manjira. It is also noteworthy that individual identities of Bidyunmala and Manikankana are interchanged to conserve the precedence and inviolability of regal sovereignty. This reciprocal exchange of the personal identities of Manikankana and Bidyunmala outlines the strategy in which female selfhood has to undergo indispensable transformation only for conforming into the masculine fabric of gender roles. The shifting of female identities is a systematic manipulation done by political authority in order to refashion patriarchal narrative. Bidyunmala does marry her lover Arjunvarma at the end, but in the disguise of Manikankana. Conversely, Devaraya weds Manikankana, who is disguised as Bidyunmala. Possibly, commodification of female body has been ingrained in the collective consciousness of the male which is reflected in King Devaraya's scheme of concealing his fiancée's true identity. Nonetheless, Khatua's play moves beyond this point, reorienting Saradindu's arrangement of the plot structure. Khatua has scripted a chain of events leading to the lethal duel between Arjunvarma and Devaraya; a confrontation evocative of the tragic feud which endlessly goes on

between commoner and despot, good and evil, oppressed and oppressor. In the play, Devaraya publicly announces that Bidyunmala has committed suicide and allows her to live a secluded life in a cave with Arjun. Meanwhile, Bidyunmala becomes pregnant but to her dismay, Arjunvarma is summoned to fight in the war. After returning victorious from battlefield, Arjunvarma finds his wife suffering from insanity due to the horrible murder of their child under the King's command. Bidyunmala eventually breathes her last in Arjun's arms and he, being utterly dejected and heartbroken, challenges Devaraya to a swordfight. The drama concludes with this ongoing confrontation and the curtain falls with a background voice enunciating the predicament of the river Tungabhadra, which has been silently witnessing the series of ever-repeating episodes of human history, deception and perfidy since time immemorial.

Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism renders the aspect of 'class-struggle' as a crucial factor in human history, which flows "like a river" (Kay 66) and is driven by a process of interactive struggle. In their celebrated treatise *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels consider that human society undergoes radical change or reorganization by this class-antagonism and conflicts which occur throughout the course of history. The subjugated people are involved in a continuous struggle against the autocrats. The unceasing encounter between Arjunvarma and King Devaraya is symbolic of the persistent collision between proletariats and the patrician autocrats. Khatua's deviation from the original storyline presents a perspective that looks at history through the lens of the Marxian philosophy of dialectical materialism; viewing the evolving pattern of history through opposition between different classes of people and their contrary interests. Hutcheon has incisively observed that any adaptation not only suspends factors like authority and preference but also "destabilize both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations" (174). In this regard, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's ideological approach towards Marxist principles is worthy of discussion. A record from his diary *Mon-Kanika*, dated 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1950 describes his famous criticism of Manik Bandyopadhyay where he refers to him not as a true litterateur but dismissed him as a "commercial artist" (363), whose motive is to foster a particular political discourse. The distinguished Bengali novelist Manik

Bandyopadhyay was widely recognized for his tilt towards Marxist doctrines. The quintessential temperament of Saradindu's historical romances is the longing for nationalism which appears to be a mix of secularism and Hindutva ideology (Gupta 14-15). His writings unfold a vision of egalitarian society, a utopian realm devoid of prejudice and discrimination where people enjoy equal opportunities. This propensity is discernible in almost every novel where the protagonist is not a direct representative of monarchy, but an individual whose moral predilection is aligned with the common masses. In *Kaler Mandira* (1950), Chitrak Varma happens to be an ordinary warrior; in *Gaurmallar* (1952), Vajradeva is a rustic youth belonging to royal ancestry; in *Band of Soldiers* (1962), the Maratha stalwart Shivaji is not the hero, but Sadashiv, an adolescent who holds affinity with the soil. An analogous trait can be observed in *By the Tungabhadra* too, where Arjunvarma and Balaram are distressed individuals who were uprooted from their native place. This egalitarian orientation comes to a crescendo with the interaction and convergence of people from diverse groups, races, ethnicities in the panorama of an idyllic lifestyle. The benevolent emperor Skandagupta is affectionate towards Lahari, his maidservant; Vajradeva receive hospitality from Kachchhu, a man from the Sabar tribe; and Arjunvarma who is a kshatriya warrior befriends Balaram, the blacksmith. Moving away from the Marxian idea of class-'struggle', Saradindu is advocating the notion of class-'harmony', a state of perfect concordance among persons from variegated social communities. His romances have preserved the conventional class structure with a humanitarian outlook where the monarch is located at the same horizontal level along with his subjects, providing no space to antipathy or resentment. It is perceptible that he wanted to relocate the ethos of human nature from the regal framework to a more schematic design of amicable existence. The postulation of a harmonious society in *By the Tungabhadra* verily proffers a microcosmic vision of India, which is largely a heterogeneous nation. This strategy was essential because during the post-independence era, India was gradually advancing towards a socialist form of governance. The word 'socialist' was officially added to our Constitution by the 42<sup>nd</sup> amendment in 1976, six years after Saradindu's death. Hence, Khatua's act of appending the dark machination

of Devaraya and its fatal consequences at the end of his dramatic adaptation is an exceptional attempt to reform the novel's intrinsic configuration.

Hutcheon has argued that the genre of performance arts has “many limitations when adapted from another mode or form” (49) because the generic metamorphosis often becomes quite obscure or jargonized which is problematic to compensate. Khatua's theatrical adaptation of Saradindu's *By the Tungabhadra* is a part of the broader cultural phenomenon; an effort to replace the traditional mode of probing into contextualized study, with a focus on altering “the way in which we view a variety of cultural products” (Kinney 9). Adaptation of any novel on the stage provokes interrogations concerning narrative proficiency, audience expectations, and re-programming of the existing text into an avant-garde context; further establishing a new platform for public reception. As Cardwell suggests, the transgressive and complex nature of dramatic adaptation “illuminate points of contention, raise questions and problems, and allow multiple perspectives” (60). Therefore, the success of Krishti's pursuit in performing ‘Tungabhadrar Teere’, with significant reconstruction in the theatrical arena depends on how satisfactorily the audiences react to these multifaceted departures and resolve the intricate questions in years to come.



The swordfight scene between Arjunvarma (Sujay Raj Maitra) and King Devaraya (Sitangshu Khatua).



Devaraya, the generous monarch in Saradindu's novel but a malevolent king in Khatua's play.

**(Footnotes)**

1. <https://www.anandabazar.com/entertainment/krishti-s-new-drama-is-tungobhadrar-teere-dgtl-1.782161>
2. [https://zeenews.india.com/bengali/entertainment/tunabhadrar-tire\\_194053.html](https://zeenews.india.com/bengali/entertainment/tunabhadrar-tire_194053.html)

**Note:**

1. All necessary information regarding performance, production history, newspaper reports, pictures etc. of the play *Tungabhadrar Teere*, have been collected from Dr. Sitangshu Khatua, director & founder of the theatre group – 'Krishti'. His residence is at present, the official address of the troupe: Flat 3D, Block 2, Sunny Valley, Sahapara, Garia, Kolkata - 700084.

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**Mysterious and ambiguous relationships in Pinter's  
*The Birthday Party*: Thoughts are essentially  
incommunicable in Pinterland.**

**Sujato Ghosh**

Thoughts are essentially incommunicable. Ideas, however evil, erotic or senile, they are best hidden underneath beautiful soft words. Such ideas when conveyed through words loses most of its essence and only very little is communicated. People tend to choose and accept words and statements to express themselves but actually such words are highly inaccurate in their exact relationship with the conceptual truth. When such words are conveyed to the listener, he/she may just grasp the insignificant portion of the concept that is conveyed and thus fail to comprehend the essential meaning. The following passage from *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter, one of the greatest advocates of the incomprehensibility of verbal language, may be cited as an example:

*Goldberg*: Webber. Why did you change your name?

*Stanley*: I forgot the other one.

*Goldberg*: What's your name now?

*Stanley*: Joey Soap.

*Goldberg*: You stink of sin...Do you recognize an external force?

*Stanley*: What?

*Goldberg*: Do you recognize an external force?... Do you recognize an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?

*Stanley*: It's late.

*Goldberg*: Where is your lechery leading you?...You stuff yourself

with dry toast...

*McCann*: What about Drogheda?

*Goldberg*: Your bite is dead. Only your pong is left...

*McCann*: Who are you, Webber?

*Goldberg*: What makes you think you exist?

*McCann*: You're dead.

*Goldberg*: You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love?

You are dead...You are nothing but an odour. (BP 60-62)

Pinter believes: "communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to other the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility" (Pinter *Sunday Times* 5). In *The Birthday Party* dialogue continually strives to get close to this "too fearsome a possibility", giving rise to a "language [...] where under what is said, another thing is being said [...]" (Pinter *Sunday Times* 16).

Norman Lovers pointed out that by Goldberg's words "one is reminded of the medieval morality play 'Everyman'. When death is carrying off Everyman, his family and his friends promise to be true to him and help him, but the moment they are invited to come with him, they find some excuse to stay behind" (1514). Words, therefore, act as a veil to hide the truth. Petey Boles did not accompany Stanley to Monty; one wonders if Meg would have done the same. Sadly enough, Meg's dreams and concerns for Stanley continue even after he is taken away by the two intruders and we find Petey dreading Meg's immediate reaction once she comes to know that Stanley has left the house. Therefore, he keeps her ignorant of the fact. Petey's action or more precisely his inaction, his apprehension and his attitude honestly reveals his thought process which perhaps his words might not have revealed. In fact, communication between Meg and Petey is more of an obscure nature than direct. Attempts to talk past one another are perhaps their objective than talking to one another. Most of Pinter's plays including *The Birthday Party* gives us such mysterious and ambiguous relationships which rely primarily on actions and then other verbal

characteristics. Arthur Ganz has rightly pointed out that “the most distinctive elements in Pinter’s dramatic technique are the ambiguity that surrounds events, the mysterious behaves of characters, the near omnipresence of menace, and the silences and other verbal characteristics” (3).

Goldberg and McCann may be seen, here, as the menace. They can also be agents who have come to Stanley’s rescue and wake him up from his slumber. Their continuous accusations and cross-examination stimulate the process of unnerving Stanley and also convinces us that words never come without ambiguity and are always confusing. It is through the veil of such verbal jugglery that the identities of both the strangers remain hidden. Even efforts are rarely made to disclose the identity of these people and also their prey. Verbal language, therefore, acts as a blanket to suppress the naked truth in man. Language without words, at least, strives to expose such truth and this has concerned Pinter for ages. Referring to a different play, which is possibly applicable to *The Birthday Party* as well, Grimes remarks:

The nature of silence in which the play ends can also be approached from within Pinter’s own conceptualization of dramatic silence, so frequently noted as his signature dramatic innovation. In his essay *Writing for the Theatre* Pinter elaborated upon silence and its relationship to human communication. His analysis can be regarded as an extension of the modern theater’s discovery of what is called “subtext,” following Stanislavsky and the myriad others inspired by his method. In making the point that communication, or revelation of self, is not dependent upon ordinary language, he implies that language continues (presumably in the forms of residue, memory, or habit) even in ostensible silence. It is as if this kind of silence is a mathematical limit that can be approached asymptotically but never reached. (217)

To mark the significance of silence and pauses and to unveil the truth Pinter uses a distinct kind of narrative style about which Hall remarked with reference to a different play:

The longest break is marked silence: the character comes out of it in a different state to when he or she began it; the next is marked

pause, which is a crisis point, filled with the unsaid; and the shortest is marked with three dots, which is a plain hesitation. The actors had to understand why there were these differences. They chafed a little but finally accepted that what was not said often spoke as forcefully as the words themselves. The breaks represented a journey in the actor's emotions, sometimes a surprising transition (Hall, in Billington, 176).

The actions of Goldberg and McCann speak more authentically than their senile words. They are people who want to 'reorient' Stanley. They believe he is in desperate need of such reorientation. Meg's motherliness only serves to shackle him and he remains unshaven, ancient and a pampered child. He has lost all the qualities of communicating with an adult. Yet Stanley needs a sense of self-identification. His initial loss of freedom caused by his staying in the rented house, living life in the shadow of maternal advice and guidance, will never enable him to lead a worldly life in which he can enjoy himself in the "club bar" or have a "table reserved". Such a man is generally a bad receptor of words and naturally loses all his innate qualities to assert his identity and to communicate. Stanley, in the process, loses his power of organizing and arranging words in socially acceptable sequence in order to veil himself like any other ordinary human being. Therefore, he runs short of words and remains silent. He degenerates into a man one can make fun of:

*Goldberg:* We'll make a man of you.

*McCann:* And a woman.

*Goldberg:* You'll be re-oriented.

*McCann:* You'll be rich.

*Goldberg:* You'll be adjusted.

*McCann:* You'll be our pride and joy.

*Goldberg:* You'll be a mensch.

*McCann:* You'll be a success.

*Goldberg:* You'll be integrated.

*McCann*: You'll give orders.

*Goldberg*: You'll make decisions.

*McCann*: You'll be a magnate.

*Goldberg*: A statesman.

*McCann*: You'll own yachts.

*Goldberg*: Animals. (BP 83)

Here there is no easy correlation, synchronized narration or comfortable distinction between the words used. The two men McCann and Goldberg produce a choric effect creating a sense of prophecy about Stanley's future success almost in the manner of the witches in *Macbeth*. These people find that the outside world is fraught with enormous possibilities, for Stanley, once he gets out of Meg's clutches. The truth lies hidden in the jugglery of words. Meg's motherliness is, in other words, not an unmixed blessing, for she loves Stanley almost as a lover who is completely dependent on her. In fact she relishes the status of Stanley as a baby as she can establish her control and dominance over him.

Mr. Stanley Webber was not a very happy man and may have gone through a lot of ordeals before he came to Meg's house. This is evident from his account of the second concert, which he was supposed to give:

*Stanley*: [...] It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter, I went down there to play. Then when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up.... A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I'd like to know who was responsible for that.... All right, Jack, I can take a tip. They want me to crawl down on my bended knees. Well I can take a tip... any day of the week. (BP 23)

Stanley, no wonder after all these traumas, has heavily depended on Mrs. Meg Boles for solace who spoils him with over-solicitous infatuation. Stanley understands that it is not possible to verbally explain and justify his trauma and accepting this fact he crawls inside the soft warm womb of Meg. However, Meg's motherliness and her senile eroticism, which

she never expresses through words, can be viewed from the point of an Oedipus complex. Stanley's unwillingness to visit the outside world and his fear of prospective sexuality outside the mother-son relationship is suggested when he refuses to indulge in a sexual relationship with Lulu. Stanley reveals a strange kind of ambivalence in his attempt to strangle Meg and make advances on Lulu in front of Goldberg and McCann. Stanley's action proves that he is desperate to come out of the smoke screen of words that he himself has created to veil himself from the external world and surprisingly Meg now becomes a member of the external world too like Lulu. But all the years that he has spent under the influence of Meg has turned him into a creature devoid of any vigour, of any serious internal initiative that could take him out of Meg's subconscious incestuous yearnings. It must be remembered that Meg and Petey are childless and therefore Meg finds a deep solid satisfaction in imposing on Stanley a birthday party to gain confirmation of her new-found motherhood. But one must remember in this connection that Meg has never communicated her desire to Stanley. Pinter has always tried to highlight the mixed nature of love, both maternal and sexual in his women characters, be it Ruth in *The Homecoming* or Meg in *The Birthday Party*. Meg, often behaving like a mother to Stanley and Stanley refusing to accept Lulu as his sexual partner prove the existence of a complex relation between Stanley and Meg. Meg also garbs her sexual attraction under the cover of maternity. Her ambiguous valedictory speech on Stanley's supposed birthday is also evocative of the same intermingled nature of passion and affection. But again thoughts and words maintain their natural distance. It is important to note that it is not only Stanley whose identity is at stake, but also that of the mother figure who finds her own identity under threat when Stanley finds the taste of cornflakes horrible at the beginning of the play:

*Meg:* Those flakes? Those lovely flakes? You are a liar. They are refreshing. It says so. For people when they get up late.

*Stanley:* The milk's off.

*Meg:* It's not. Petey ate his, didn't you! Petey?

*Petey:* That's right.

*Meg:* There you are then.

*Stanley:* All right, I'll go on to the second course. (BP 15)

The above passage also shows how the three characters hide their thoughts and their real self under the soft cover of words. But physical action is possibly more direct and honest and since Meg is not ready to lose any opportunity to prove herself as a caring mother and Stanley, on the other hand, is not ready to either sacrifice Meg's maternity or Lulu's sexuality therefore as soon as Meg "takes his plate and ruffles his hair, as she passes, Stanley exclaims and throws her arm away [...]". Stanley's comments are naturally confusing than his action:

*Stanley:* ... And it isn't your place to come to a man's bedroom and wake him up [...]

Then he adds:

*Stanley:* I don't know what I'd do without you. (BP 18)

Stanley's sudden change of mood and the transformation in his verbal language from irritation and disgust to complete dependence on Meg seems shocking and difficult to explain as words and thoughts, both, are always difficult to correlate. There seems to be a vacillation between the adult and the child in him. It is however not only Stanley who is so dependent on Meg and cannot do anything without Meg. The intensity of Meg's love for Stanley is evident from the way Petey conceals everything from his wife, and never tries to communicate that Goldberg and McCann have carried Stanley away, as he knows that Meg cannot bear the loss of Stanley. This is possibly the only occasion in the play when Petey sympathetically communicates with his wife without really communicating through words, thus paradoxically communicating through non-communication. This action of Petey leads us to understand how much he feels for Meg. Stanley throughout the play has remained an unsocial character; his finding of the boarding house inhabited by a mother figure like Meg must have been a dream come true to him. In this confined territory he seems to gain recognition as he enjoys Meg's appreciation of

him as a wonderful concert pianist – a past that he so confidently reveals to Meg. However, whatever is known about Stanley’s past is told by Stanley himself and Pinter appears to draw a veil of mystery and enough uncertainty about the truth he utters. Speech and verbal communication is generally misleading in Pinterland. Like all mothers (in Pinterland or otherwise), Meg trusts him and believes his success story to be true.

The characters in Pinter’s plays often use typically spare language and deep silence. Words that they use can be extremely merciless or hackneyed or may sometimes be both at the same time. Through such jugglery of words Pinter conveys the meaninglessness of verbal language. Volleys of such words juxtaposed against each other give Pinter the opportunity to project that the words, disarranged and disarrayed, actually eliminates the meaning that silences could otherwise have conveyed. Speech turns out to be a necessary medium to humiliate speech. In other words; words only remain significant to reveal its insignificance in conveying the sporadic and even the regular thoughts of the human mind. Pinter’s characters speak a kind of language that is, awkward, monotonous, circular but is actually more faithful, more like real human communication than the oratorically patterned dialogue found in what is considered to be “realistic” drama. Through pauses, silences and body language of the characters Pinter creates uncertainty, insecurity, surprise and excitement in the mind of the audience. The audience is transported to the world of menace by making them share the psychosomatic stress and strains of his characters. Words, however, in most Pinteresque situations becomes a useful tool to hide the devious and sometimes even the pristine thoughts of the human mind. Characters suffer from deep isolation due to deliberate avoidance of communication. Instead of uniting people words continue to push them to further isolation. Language continues to lose its primary function i. e. to communicate. Pinter easily goes into the subtext beneath the surface level of the common language. Through the purposelessness of language Pinter exposes the absurdity of the human condition. Thrilling and rib-tickling, familiar and unfamiliar, alarming and appealing, in *The Birthday Party* we find the archetypal Pinter.

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## **Personal Recollections of Mahesh Dattani**

**Amitava Roy**

Hundreds of scholarly and academic papers, articles and books plus a clutch of PhD. theses have been written on Mahesh Dattani, nor leading Indian playwright in English and no doubt will continue to be written in future as Dattani's art as playwright and value as social commentator becomes even more relevant as time goes on. I have no desire to add to this plethora of Scholarship and Criticism on Dattani.

Therefore I will here pen some personal recollections of my long and on-going friendship with Mahesh. I first saw Mahesh around three decades ago at several National and International Seminars and Conferences where he appeared as a rather self-effacing and modest but attention-grabbing personality. But my real friendship and personal intimacy with Mahesh I owe to my daughter Rukmini (nee Roy, now Roy Basu after Marriage). Circa 2000-2001 young Rukmini was pursuing a Degree in Bangalore at the famed Symbiosis Institute and had come down to Kolkata as part of her field-work as a trainee journalist and Mass Media specialist. Mahesh happened to be in Kolkata at the very same time and they met at the British Council and the USIS where they were introduced and Rukmini requested an interview:

Mahesh : "I am very fond of Calcutta's fuchkas. I am willing to give you the Interview if you can direct me to the park in South Calcutta where there are these all-India famed stalls of fuchkawallahs all ranged in rows"

Rukmini : "That's no problem. These fuchkawallahs ply their relishful trade very close to where I live in South Calcutta. Infact my mother and I have grown up having these de-li-cious blobs as special treats of my school and college days. I'll escort you there".

Mahesh : “Then I’m in very good hands. Let’s go. The interview we can have on the way”.

Rukmini : “A better idea would be to have the interview after the fuchkas. When you’ll be in a most relaxed, peaceful and wholly satisfied state of mind. If you have the time we can walk down to my home just 10 minutes away where the interview can take place over tea or coffee. Also you can get to meet my father who hates fuchkas but loves playwrights and anything to do with theatre. He is the Shakespeare Professor of English and Drama at RabindraBharati University and will surely be overjoyed to meet you.”

Mahesh : “That’s seems just the right way to spend this evening in Culcuta. I am ready to roll”.

Rukmini rang me up to inform me of this fortunate and fortuitous development and asked me to await the advent of the playwright and Man of Theatre from Banglore to descend upon us at home, quite out of the blue as it were.

Mahesh Dattani arrived with Rukmini after the fuchkas, had black tea with fresh lemon and we embarked upon a wonderful ‘adda’ and the beginning of a long friendship.

Mahesh : “You have a lovely daughter, Professor. Her expertise as navigator for the Dattani carriage took me to the blobby haven of famed fuchkawallahs for which I am profoundly grateful. Mrs. Roy’s cheese pakoras and special tea are excellent. The Interview can commence in-between our gupshup, or as the Bengali’s call it ‘adda’.

We talked on things far and wide, close up and near, about cabbages and kings, of our families, friends and enemies, of theatre, love, life and laughter, successes and failures, of remarkable experiences across multifarious India and the world, of meetings and partings—not necessarily in that order but all laced with Mahesh’s quiet wit and sense of humour and my occasional guffaws.

From that evening on Mahesh became part of our family with whom I have spent hours and days across the swiftly flowing years:

Mahesh directing me and other actors at playreading and Acting

Workshops at the British Councils across India: At Banaras Hindu University inaugurating and moderating Mahesh's Special Chair Lectures and Workshops: hosting Mahesh at the Shakespeare Society Foundation Lecture in Kolkata—a prestigious by-annual event in India's Cultural Calendar where invited speakers have included Poet, Sanskritist and Transcreator P.Lal, Prof. Jyoti Bhattacharya, Minister of Education and Culture Govt. of West Bengal and arguably the greatest ever teacher of Shakespeare in the Indian Class-rooms, Dr. Antony Johae, globally renowned Comparativist from Sussex University, UK, Prof. Sheila T Cavanagh, Director World Shakespeare Project from USA, Prof. Ron Paterson, theatre specialist from UK et al; inaugurating the *Mahesh Dattani Library and Archive*, the only one of its kind in India housing all his books, writings by and on him and memorabilia at the P.G. Section of the Dum Dum Motijheel College—through many more events and incidents together with him.

Mahesh Dattani is certainly India's greatest living English playwright and Man of the Theatre who is celebrated and respected all over the globe. Of his two greatest strengths as a playwright one is his outstanding ability to re-create the accents of the speaking human voice thereby bringing real human existence on to the stage. In this he is comparable to Shakespeare and Bratya Basu— who of course writes in Bangla—two of our greatest modern dramatists to date. The other strength is the ability to make us *feel* the sufferings and sorrows, the agonies and ecstasies of the marginalized, the subaltern, the oppressed, insulted, rejected and humiliated flotsam and jetsam of society as perhaps no other playwright can. I remember that my daughter's interview of Mahesh had begun with her assertion that here is a Playwright as Thinker who gives us 'lessons in *feeling* through his plays'.

Mahesh writes for the middle and upper class English-educated Indian and English speakers across the globe but his heart is with the underclass of the abused and the exploited. He had made us realize through his texts and performances the profound truth revealed by the English poet John Donne in his 17<sup>th</sup> century prose sermon,

“Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee...for no man is an island entire of himself, we are all parts of a continent”.

A profound truth most necessary for our very survival in a divided, cast and class and gender-driven politicised India.

**Discriminations and Indian Society:  
Mahesh Dattani's *Clearing the Rubble* and  
*The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child***

**Bidisha Munshi**

The radio plays *Clearing the Rubble* and *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* reveal Mahesh Dattani's concern for the poor and downtrodden victims of the caste and religious discriminations of Indian society. These unfortunate people are devoid of their basic rights in spite of the constitutional principle of equality promised to every citizen of India. They do not have proper food, education, shelter. Our democratic government has not achieved considerable success in this sphere even after so many years of independence. Dattani highlights these issues in both these plays using the backdrop of natural calamities like the terrible drought of Saurashtra and the massive earthquake in Bhuj.

*The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* is structured as a monologue of an English woman Anna Gosweb. Naturally the events depicted in the play is filtered through the consciousness of a single character, the only dramatic persona in the play. She enlivens, reconstructs and interprets her past and this play becomes a fine synthesis of the narrative and dramatic modes of representation.

At the inception of the play Dattani's agonising consciousness of the society's indifferent and apathetic attitude towards the sufferers of poverty and caste discrimination even in the hour of acute crisis finds an expression in Jaman's letter to Gosweb written during the appalling drought of Saurashtra:

“Our Gods have failed us, or should I say that they did not succeed in reaching us. They were too busy favouring our brethren in the cities and of course, the higher caste people of the villages. I have never begged you or anyone else for anything in my life. I cannot

bear the humiliation any longer of seeing my wife and child suffer so.” (Dattani 565-66)

In this letter Jaman’s sense of self-respect as well as his concern for family is quite discernible. Anna’s relationship with Jaman is the mainspring of her action. She comes to India to help Jaman and his family and, at the same time, to let him know about Jennifer, her daughter born as a consequence of her casual intimacy with Jaman. Thus Dattani intermingles Anna’s personal crisis with social concerns. Her intense urge to help Jaman and his family originates in her consciousness of guilt due to her irresponsible and impulsive liaison with him as well as her heartfelt sympathy for them.

Anna’s relationship with Jaman was not based on love or spiritual affinity. It was a casual pleasure seeking on Anna’s part. For Jaman it was a compulsive act. Being an illiterate person who had to depend on foreigners to earn his living, he had to succumb to Anna’s advances. Helplessness born of poverty, illiteracy and caste discrimination provoked Jaman to get involved with an almost unknown woman. Thus this is an instance of how poor people in this country are being exploited, commodified and victimised. The gender role gets reversed. Jaman in spite of being a man is exploited here by Anna, a woman. In fact, Dattani seems to show gender is not the sole factor of oppression. Power can be exercised through wealth, ethnicity, education and culture.

The title of the play is itself quite significant. The play brings out the mother latent in Anna’s heart through her relationship with Shanti, Jaman’s daughter. Their unique relationship illustrates how the force of true love and affection can overcome the innumerable barriers of country, language, rigidity, superstitions, prejudices as well as social adversities. On reaching Kapaswadi, Jaman’s village, Anna comes to know that Jaman is dead. She breaks down. She feels that her journey is a total waste. But when she meets his family, his wife and his daughter she is deeply moved by their plight. Especially with Shanti she could sense a strong connection instantly: “All at once, she was a part of me.” (Dattani 568) Shanti was Anna’s “new age name” (Dattani 568) and this signifies Anna’s spiritual affinity with Shanti. Moreover, Anna can see the shadow of imminent

death on her. “Jaman’s daughter, Shanti...the deathscape I had seen earlier was reflected in her face, her body.” (Dattani 568) Jaman’s wife wants Anna to go away but Shanti does not. Looking at Jennifer’s photograph Shanti kisses it and utters the word “sister” (Dattani 569) Jaman’s wife is weeping. Anna realises that they know about her. Her connection with them becomes stronger. Anna feels a powerful urge to stay and help them. She has enough resources to rescue them from the crisis. She seeks to communicate with them with her broken Gujarati. She witnesses painfully how the lower caste people like Jaman’s family are deprived of the basic needs like food and water. The water they have to consume is unhygienic. Even relief tankers are placed primarily near the upper caste neighbourhood. Caste system, believed to be nearly 3000 years old, is in Eisenman’s words, the “longest living social hierarchy in the world”(Keane 267). Jaman and his family belong to the lowest stratum of Hindu caste system, they are Harijans or Untouchables. Historically they are outside this system. Untouchability is banned under article 17 of the Indian Constitution. But the prejudices have not died yet.

Anna can sense how the extreme starvation is killing Shanti silently but inevitably. All, including her mother are preparing themselves for her impending death. They have lost so many of their dear ones that they have become used to it. But Anna cannot tolerate it anymore. She did not know what to do but she is desperate to save her.

“I know that look of starvation. I couldn’t allow it to happen. Not in front of my eyes...I picked her up my arms and started to walk away from the group. They couldn’t help her any more, but maybe I could.” (Dattani 570)

She and Jaman’s wife go to the bus stop. Anna is so determined that she ignores completely the system on boarding the bus favouring the upper caste people and they become successful in boarding a bus heading towards Kapileshwar. At Kapileshwar they take Shanti to the relief camp and her treatment starts. Her condition revives gradually. When the nurse brings the food Anna grabs the bowl and feeds Shanti. She knows that her action may be wrong, she is, perhaps, doing injustice to Shanti’s mother because it is her right to feed her child. But Anna is so anxious

that she cannot resist from doing it. And when Shanti eats Anna calms down.

After Shanti's recovery Anna spends some months with Jaman's family. She develops wonderful bondings not only with Shanti but with Jaman's wife and others also.

“We played in the sands, Shanti and I. Jaman's wife and aunt taught me some songs. They laughed at my Hindi. Soon the monsoons arrived. We danced in the rains. I helped plough their land. We ran through the fields and bathed in the pond. Mother earth's breasts were swelling up once again with nourishment for her children. I could have stayed on forever.” (Dattani 572)

Anna has derived a new meaning of life through this experience. She is now quite satisfied and consoled. She may not have been able to meet and save Jaman from his inevitable and helpless death but she rescue his family from the same consequence.

“I saved them. At least I saved Shanti. I fed her everyday and will do so as long as I live.” (Dattani 572)

Anna sees her own reflection in Jaman's wife. Both of them are vulnerable mothers of their respective daughters. Anna's daughter Jennifer does not allow her mother to help her. She is in hospital. At the end of the play she comes to know it. She returns to her daughter but knows that there is a barrier between them. She seeks to find some solace for her troubled relationship with Jennifer in saving Shanti. A new ray of hope is born in her heart that somebody will appear to save her daughter's life. Mahesh Dattani presents his idea of womanhood here. He shows Anna Gosweb, a citizen from a developed country and Jaman's unnamed wife, a poor and illiterate woman from a developing country, participate in the same experience because both of them have to struggle all alone for their respective daughters.

Anna's life can be analysed in three different stages. During her first visit to India she was an immature girl of nineteen who seeks pleasure from a casual relationship with a guide coming from a village to earn some money for his family. As a consequence she becomes a mother of

a wonderful girl like Jennifer. After almost twenty years she receives a letter from Jaman, her daughter's father pleading for some money to save his family from the terrible drought in Saurashtra. Anna does not hesitate to come to India with all her money to help him and his family. This fact exhibits not only her kindness and generosity for a poor family but her eagerness to make Jaman aware of their daughter also.

Now she becomes mature enough to value human relationship. She wants to bring together the father and his daughter, if not forever, at least, she takes the initiative to arrange to meet each other. After she gets to know Jaman's wife she can assess rightly the "pride and sense of dignity" (Dattani 568) of these poor and lower caste people. At the same time she can realise how Jaman's wife feels about her: "I was her late husband's girlfriend. Nobody can be mature about such things". (Dattani 568) Anna knows quite well that Jaman succumbed to her sexual desires only because of money which was so needed for his family.

However, after so many years Anna learns to evaluate her relationship with Jaman in right perspective. Her preference to call Shanti's mother as "Jaman's wife" (Dattani 569) is, perhaps, born out of a consciousness of her guilt done against that woman. When she meets her (Jaman's wife) she cannot see her face because of her veil. She feels "That veil was the greatest barrier between us." (Dattani 569) But beyond that barrier Anna can feel her powerlessness, grief, troubles as well as sense of self-pride. Anna can identify herself with this woman. Both of them are lonely and helpless with their daughters. The veil of Jaman's wife is a symbol of submissiveness, voicelessness and powerlessness. Her anguish is shown through her tears. Beyond the vast difference of social, political, economical, cultural and even racial identities, these two women's battles become one because they are mothers.

*Clearing the Rubble*, a radio play focusses on the victims of the religious and racial discrimination of Indian society. It is a commissioned play, broadcast on BBC Radio on the first anniversary of the massive earthquake in Bhuj. It revolves around three voices: Jeffrey, an English journalist, Salim, a poor boy and Fatima, his mother. All of them are profoundly affected by this devastating tragedy. Through their experiences

Dattani provides us with a realistic and gloomy picture of the unjust and biased treatment of the privileged classes towards the backward sections because of their religious identity and economic status.

On 26th January, 2001, India's 51st Republic day, at 8.46 a.m.IST, Gujarat was convulsed by a powerful earthquake measuring 7.7 on Richter scale. A vast area had been affected by this tragedy. Thousands of people were killed, many were injured and uncounted numbers had lost their homes. This play portrays the miseries of the doomed human beings through the revelation of their inner selves. With his wonderful art Dattani reminds us again of the stream-of-consciousness technique used in the modern novels. There are three fully drawn characters only. Jeffrey, an English journalist has reached Malliya, a town of Gujarat on January 28, 2001, two days after the earthquake. On his way to Malliya he witnesses the destruction, there is no trace of buildings for miles, everything has been ruined, nothing remains but the heaps of rubble. Relief camps are going on. People come from different villages for necessary equipments and assistance. The bus has to stop seventeen kilometres before Malliya because of the obstruction on the road due to the earthquake. Jeffrey enters a village. The whole village is cut off from the rest of the world. He can sense the intense agony of the people who have lost everything in this tragedy. But they are so overwhelmed that they are not mourning, they remain dumb and voiceless: "...I realize that these people have lost their homes, their livelihoods, their loved ones... Everyone here has lost something or someone. They are not crying. There are no wails. Only silence. Grief everywhere but I cannot see it." (Dattani 67-68) The heaps of rubble epitomise what remain in their lives. Grief becomes the ultimate and inescapable reality of their cursed lives. A mother is singing a lullaby to an empty cradle. But she is singing continuously as if to soothe a restless baby. People go on with their regular routine as if nothing had happened. Suddenly, Jeffrey hears a desperate cry for help coming from the debris of a large building. He finds a thin adolescent boy with a grimed face, clad in a tattered white shirt. Jeffrey seeks to dress the wounds of the boy. But the boy is more worried about his mother and sisters who are confined in the debris of the dilapidated hospital building.

This boy is Salim who pleads with Jeffrey to save his mother and sisters from being buried alive. Jeffrey asks Salim about the insufficiency of relief efforts: there is no crane, no medical assistance, no supporting equipment. Salim answers, "We are Muslims." (Dattani 69) He is certain that this answer needs no further explanation. The fact that they belong to the religious minority section of the populace becomes detrimental in getting assistance even after such a dreadful tragedy. Salim's helpless cry makes Jeffrey go to the city in search of the crane with some men. The biased nature of the rescue operations is quite evident here. Jeffrey and his companions manage to get a truck full of necessary food and equipments by force. Thus they succeed to save some lives of the hapless village.

Fatima, Salim's mother is also saved by this effort. But she loses her children. She has come to hospital with her children for her youngest daughter's treatment. She muses on her children's fateful lives. She considers Saira to be the most fortunate one because she has left the world at a very tender age, before any injustice could be done to her. But Mumtaz, her middle child had to confront the severest treatment both from life and from her mother. Her mother saw her own reflection in Mumtaz and taught her to work. She thought she would achieve a respectable life only through her hard-work. Mumtaz's father was a cobbler. He died early leaving no money for his family: "But in this land where people do not have sandals on their feet, how will he find work mending them?" (Dattani 74) Her mother had to work as a labourer during the construction of the hospital building disregarding her father's wish to send Salim, her son to school. Salim became the only ray of hope for a better tomorrow of Fatima's dream. She sacrificed Mumtaz to continue Salim's education. After the death of her husband, Mumtaz was sent to the hospital as a cleaner. But one day she expressed her unwillingness to go to work. But Fatima refused to listen to her. She compelled her to go. Mumtaz was accused of stealing money and was stripped naked. Being buried alive under the heap of rubble Fatima holds herself to be responsible for Mumtaz's humiliation and asks for forgiveness from her daughter.

To sacrifice the life and future of the girl child for her male counterpart is a common practice in India. Dattani voices against this discriminatory

and biased attitude towards girl children in many of his plays. But in those plays he focuses on the urban middle class and upper middle class people. In this play he highlights this issue in the perspective of rural milieu where parents have to take decision in favour of their male child and against the female one not only out of prejudices but out of compulsion also. Here the dramatist shows how extreme poverty and helplessness force people towards injustice and wrong decisions.

Lastly, Fatima admits that Salim is not her favourite child. She prefers Mumtaz to him. But she has done everything to initiate and continue Salim's education because she has hoped that he would have rescued the family from their present deplorable situation. But she is disappointed with him because he has lied in school to hide his religious identity and father's occupation. She thinks that Salim was ashamed of his religion and his father's profession as a cobbler. But Salim explains that his intense longing to be treated as an equal, not an inferior human being led him to falsehood. The maltreatment of others who looked down upon him as somebody who had intruded into their own space directed him to fabricate an unreal image of himself as a farmer's son in a stranger's eye. He did this knowing fully well that the deception would not last long but he wanted to rise in someone else's eyes even for a moment. The anguish and suffering of a boy who has been ill-treated by a biased society is poignant.

The democracy that India has been practising for years has not been able to eradicate the inequality, intolerance, racism and dogmatism from the society altogether. We are still divided in so many compartments that the poor and powerless sections have to suffer greatly. Social segregation makes us weaker day by day. And we cannot find a way out of this malady.

Salim dies, and his sisters too. And many more have met the same fate. But they remain in the village. They live there even after their deaths. These ghosts cannot go from there because their existences are not acknowledged by the authority. They live and they die, like any creature other than humans, their desires, dreams, passions, achievements—everything go unnoticed by this world. In our country they are just nobody, creatures who do not have any identity of their own.

Mahesh Dattani is an active crusader against all kinds of discriminations, inequalities, injustices and biased treatments directed towards the weaker sections of our society. In an interview he expresses his fear regarding the present situation of this country: “We are getting deeper into the politics of segregation. Segregation breeds even more segregation.” (Outlook, 26th May, 2014). He is, in all respects, against the caste and community based politics and policies because of their divisive potentials. He has established himself as a champion of social equity and justice in these two plays too.

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## **Reading Stage Properties in Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions***

**Shirshendu Basu**

The study of theatrical properties or stage props has traditionally been a rather neglected area in drama or theatre criticism. In Chapter 16 of the *Poetics* for instance, Aristotle does mention the use in classical Greek drama of a number of props like necklaces, letters, pictures and even the ark in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE tragedy *Tyro*, but he dismisses their use as being something “less artistic.” (58-9) Indeed, it is only recently that the study of the importance of stage properties in drama has begun to take hold of the minds of critics and historians of theatre practice. The new awareness is that “props are more than just three dimensional symbols; they are part of the material fabric of the play in performance. Enlivened by the actor’s touch, charged by the playwright’s dialogue, and quickened in the spectator’s imagination, they take on a life of their own as they weave in and out of the stage action.” (Sofervi) Eleanor Margolies in her book *Props: Readings in Theatre Practice* has recently described props as “especially vibrant examples of material culture, found at the intersection of business interests (investments and assets), daily life (many props move back and forth between everyday use and onstage life) and artistic decisions (props can suggest how history, other countries or mythological figures, for example, have been represented in particular productions).” (Margolies 3) Another scholar, Frances Teague, who has systematically analyzed Shakespeare’s use of props in his plays, has noted that “A *property* is an object... that occurs onstage, where it functions differently from the way it functions offstage. At the moment when the audience notes its entry into the dramatic action a property has meaning; it may also have meaning as one of a class of objects. ...generally, a playwright

uses a property to establish a character or to forward action.” (quoted in Sofer 12-13) Since there have been very little systematic study of stage props done in India on such material objects as props in one of our most prominent dramatists, Mahesh Dattani, it will be the intention of this paper to look into the role and function of some of the prominent stage props in Dattani’s famous play *Final Solutions*.

Before turning to the props which are physical things, usually small in size, which are seen on the stage and put to use by the actors in their performance, it needs to be noted that the use of such objects in English drama seems to date back to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century play, *The Castle of Perseverance*. However there seems to have been no specific term in use for props before 1811, when according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word first came to be used. It should also be noted that the word “prop” originated from the expression “company property”, for such objects as swords, weapons, cups, plates and dishes, bottles, handkerchiefs and so on, used onstage in a theatrical performance were not owned by any individual but were the property of the group of players who staged their plays together as a “company”. And apart from this, it should also be kept in mind that “props” have to be differentiated from other theatrical objects like stage-sets, stage scenery and the costumes worn by the actors onstage in the course of their acting.

In England, by the time of Thomas Kyd and Shakespeare, props had become an inextricable and inalienable part of the art of theatre. One remembers Kyd’s Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* stepping on stage with a rope in one hand and a knife in the other, both of which objects are stage props. Even the dirty and smelly human skull picked up by Hamlet is a stage prop. Or we can refer to other later properties like the stuffed duck in Ibsen’s play *The Wild Duck*, the cucumber sandwiches consumed onstage in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and even the bottle of *Tik-20* insecticide in Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Apart from this, one should not forget that the featuring of stage props was not unknown in classical Indian drama too. In Sudraka’s play *Mricchakatika* for example, we see the fully functional use of a material dramatic object in the jewellery box that Vasantasena

leaves in the custody of her lover, Charudatta. This indicates that when Mahesh Dattani put to use a good number of stage properties in his play *Final Solutions*, he was only following in the footsteps of countless playwrights before him.

Right at the beginning of the play, there is a sequence of action involving the use of the prop of a telephone – a landline receiver, since cell-phones did not exist when Dattani first staged the play in 1993. On-stage, we see and hear Ramnik Gandhi, the protagonist in the play, trying to ring up the father of a girl whose college hostel had been bombed during a communal riot that had broken out in the town. Ramnik is a Hindu, whereas the girl who is a classmate of Ramnik's daughter in the same college, is a Muslim. The prop of the telephone serves a very important dramatic function for it enables the audience to hear the words of Ramnik and thus allows it to form a favourable idea about Ramnik being generous and well meaning enough to phone the girl's father to assure him about the safety of his daughter. The sudden termination of the call by the girl's father even as Ramnik indulges in small talk, surprises Ramnik. But we as members of the audience understand that the cutting off of the call is a signal of the social distrust that exists between the members of the two major religious communities in India. This implication which is vital to the theme of the drama, could never have been made clear if the prop of the telephone had not been employed by Dattani.

Beyond this, the fact that the call was not getting through despite repeated efforts is also significant. In the early 1990s when the play was written, the quality of the landline phone service was very poor. Getting a connection to another number used to take a great deal of time and effort, with telephone users routinely having to dial a number many times before getting connected. The prop of the malfunctioning telephone in the play is therefore a realistic reflection of the sorry state of the contemporary telephone services in our country when Dattani was setting his play. Members of the first audiences would have understood and empathized with Ramnik, and may have been even amused, for they would have had experienced similar problems in using their own telephones. The malfunctioning instrument in other words historicizes Dattani's play as it refers to a particular period of time in India.

Less realistic in effect are a number of other stage props used in the play. For instance, there are the sticks carried by the two Choruses, both Hindu and Muslim. These props serve a clearly symbolic function in the dramatic action of *Final Solutions*. By themselves, sticks carry a double signification for they can imply either weapons of offence or indicate a means of support for the weak, the old or the infirm. Interestingly, it seems clear that in *Final Solutions* Dattani indicates both meanings. The former implication is suggested when the Chorus chase the two young Muslim youths Bobby and Javed, and also later when they beat upon the ground (stage) with their sticks. The latter meaning comes into play also as we see that the sticks have Hindu and Muslim masks mounted on top of them. Since the same four or five men constitute the two choruses, the idea is that the sticks support and constitute the idea of the divergent religious identities of the men. However, even as the sticks and the masks appear to emphasize difference, the fact that the men constituting the two choruses are the same indicates that there is no real difference between the Muslims and the Hindus since both peoples are identical as human beings foremost.

A handkerchief with knots tied at its four corners is another stage prop that is used in the play. Since this handkerchief is a substitute for the *Namazi* cap that is used by Muslims for their prayers, this prop signifies a particular religious identity. In fact, it is the discovery of this handkerchief in Bobby's pocket that leads the Hindu mob to conclude that Bobby and Javed are Muslims. Hence they are beaten up and chased by the mob. But apart from this there are other props in *Final Solutions* that carry a religious implication. Among these may be mentioned the bell suspended over the door of the puja room in Ramnik Gandhi's house, the puja tray carried by Ramnik's wife Aruna, and even the tiny idol of the God Krishna which is picked up and handled by Bobby towards the conclusion of the play. These properties which are loaded with religious connotations, are indicative of the reality of the communal divide which is what *Final Solutions* is about.

One other fact that needs to be noted about stage props in drama is that the size of the property does not matter. What is significant instead

is the use the particular property – big or small – is put to. Since all the action in *Final Solutions* takes place in Ramnik Gandhi's house (in his living room and the puja room) and over a few hours spread over one night to the early morning hours the next day, none of the props are unfamiliar objects. Most indeed are domestic articles like a vessel containing milk, two glasses, a couple of pillows and a bedsheet, and a bucket of water. These may appear to be ordinary or even insignificant, but each is given a specific connotative charge in the play's unfolding action. The utensil containing milk is avoided being touched by Ramnik Gandhi's wife Arunaas she has seen a house-lizard fall on it. Without the mention of this prop, we would not have understood that Aruna is superstitious to a degree and sensitive to issues of touch. This is manifested later in the play when she gingerly picks up the glasses from which the Muslim boys had drunk water as if they had been contaminated by their touch. A completely contrary attitude and behaviour is manifested by Aruna's daughter Smita who is a college friend of Bobby, one of the young Muslim men. When her mother asks her to fill a bucket of water to be used in the morning's puja rituals, she passes the bucket on to Bobby who belongs to a different faith to fill with water. The pillows and the bedsheet serve a more utilitarian dramatic function as they indicate that the two youths will be spending the night sleeping in Ramnik Gandhi's living room.

Some other props in the play that need to be taken note of include an old fashioned oil lamp, a fountain pen and a diary. The lamp is an indication of a time past, one of the time zones featured in the play. This time is in the late 1940s, a year or two after India's Independence when the young Daksha marries into the family of Ramnik Gandhi's father and has her name changed to Hardika by her in-laws. The newly-wed girl who is still in her early teens, begins to keep a diary in which she jots down her most private thoughts. The pen that she uses is an old one discarded by her father-in-law. All these properties are significant not only because they tell us a great deal about Ramnik Gandhi's mother when she had been young, but also because they indicate the economy of power existent inside a typical Indian family half a century back. The diary itself is a particularly significant property as it is shown to be in use in several

places in the play, both in the past and in the present. This prop thus serves as a material link and as a sign of continuity over the years that Daksha alters from being a girl-wife to old lady with a son and a grandchild of her own.

All this should illustrate just how important stage props are in Dattani's play *Final Solutions*. However, let me also try to propose a kind of theoretical frame in order to better understand Dattani's use of props in his play. In his dramatic criticism in the *Poetics*, Aristotle significantly focused not on the physical performance of tragedy and its specific audio-visual effect, but also on the idea of *mimesis* or imitation. The means or modes of imitation are set out by Aristotle, and the greatest importance is given to *Mythos* or plot. There are five other elements mentioned by Aristotle, among which the one associated with sets, props, and the physics of acting is *Opsis* or "Spectacle." This, however, is given the very least importance by Aristotle as it is listed only as the last of the six elements of tragedy. "The Spectacle," said Aristotle in Chapter 6 of *The Poetics*, "though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has the least to do with the art of poetry... [T]he getting up of the Spectacle is more a matter for the costumier than the poet." (Bywater 39)

What I would like to point out, but, is that in *Final Solutions*, props serve at least two basic functions. The first is that they help the dramatic action as the prop of the telephone does at the beginning of the play. The second is that they often serve as symbols which contribute to the meaning of the play. But it may also be possible to regard the props in Dattani's play in the light of T.S. Eliot's observations about Objective Correlative. In his essay "Hamlet", Eliot stated that:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot 92)

It may be said that props are what Eliot refers to as "a set of objects", and so we can say the "sensory experience" of seeing, or perhaps even

hearing, the “external facts” of the props can evoke the emotion intended to be communicated by Dattani in *Final Solutions*.

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6. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Vol.V, prepared by Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

## **Badal Sircar in Manipur**

**Tapu Biswas**

On 6th June 1891, in the British literary journal *The Nineteenth Century* an article was published written by a high ranking soldier and long-time colonial administrator in India. This man was Major General James Johnstone, and his essay was the first published account of the people and the locale of the then princely kingdom of Manipur. A few years later in 1896, Johnstone's posthumous full length book entitled *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills* was published from London<sup>1</sup>, but it seems that his 1891 essay sparked an interest about Manipur in the minds of the people of Bengal in particular. Johnstone's essay was read by none other than Rabindranath Tagore who reacted to it by writing a short essay "Monipurer Barnana"<sup>2</sup> which was published in the Bengali journal *Sadhana* soon after. Both Johnstone's article and Tagore's essay are of special significance since it was through these that the people of India and Bengal — and the rest of the world — came to learn about the previously largely unknown customs and culture of the Manipuri people. Tagore himself never visited this hilly North-Eastern Indian state for the colonial British government never gave him the needed permission, but it is possible that Johnstone's description attracted his attention and perhaps encouraged him to later think of incorporating elements of Manipuri dance styles in his own creative choreographic practices. What is certain however that Tagore was deeply interested in Manipuri culture, which is why in 1925 he got two Manipuri dancers from Agartala, Guru Nabakumar Singh and his brother Baikantha Singh, to teach Manipuri dance to the students in his Santiniketan school. Tagore's interest in Manipur may conceivably also have led him to compose his dance-drama *Chitrangada* in 1892, and to subsequently write *Chitra*<sup>3</sup>, a one-act play in English about the Manipuri princess Chitrangada in 1913. However, it was not till several decades

later that another creative artiste from Bengal travelled to Manipur and deepened the cultural ties between the two peoples. This man was Badal Sircar who both learnt from the traditions of the performing arts of Manipur and in turn helped to bring about a renaissance in the writing of drama and in styles of theatre performance in Manipur.

It may be said indeed that Sircar was the theatre activist who single-handedly brought about a revolution in the form and content of modern Manipuri drama. Unlike Tagore who had been denied access to Manipur, Sircar's visit was sponsored by a governmental agency, the Manipur State Kala Akademi. This happened 25 years after India's Independence and the accession of the princely kingdom of Manipur into India on 17th August 1947. The coming of independence was a positive development in so far as the opening up of the culture of the Manipuris was concerned. Under the older system of hereditary kingship, culture had been nurtured by the King and his ministers alone. The result had been insularity and inbreeding, but after Independence there was an effort made by the government sponsored Manipur State Kala Akademi to open up the culture of the State to the rest of India. It was as part of this effort that Badal Sircar was first invited to visit Manipur in 1972 to take part in a drama festival held in Imphal, the State's capital. Sircar and his troupe "Satabdi" which he had started five years previously in 1967, performed no less than three of Sircar's plays under his direction in the festival. On 26 October, *Ballavpurer Rupkatha* (originally written in Bengali in 1963) was performed, and this was followed by *Ses Nei* (originally written in Bengali in 1970) which was staged on 28 October. Finally, on 30 October 1972 was staged *Evam Indrajit*. The actors involved in these productions included Badal Sircar himself, together with Pankaj Munshi, Bharati Sarkar, Putu Sarkar, Samar Bhowmik, Rajat Sarkar and Dilip Bhattacharya.

This was soon after Sircar had started his experiments in the Open Theatre format with productions that could be staged without any scenery, props, formal auditoria or even raised stages and curtains, and having had the opportunity of watching several Manipuri drama productions during this festival, Sircar came to realize that conditions in Manipur were eminently suitable for the development of Open Theatre since the distance

between urban and folk cultures here was less than in other places in India. After this initial interaction, the very next year in 1973 the Manipur State Kala Akademi invited Sircar to conduct a drama workshop. The Manipuri experimental theatre director Heisnam Kanhailal was engaged to be Sircar's assistant during this workshop which started on the very evening of Sircar's arrival in Imphal, that is on 30 April 1973, and continued for three weeks. Desiring to make his workshop a representative one, Sircar had proposed that Manipuri theatre workers involved in experimental theatre should be invited to participate. However, the State Akademi authorities asked theatre practitioners not only from Imphal but also from all over Manipur to join in the workshop, and so over forty participants came to participate. The workshop itself was held in a shed-like room with iron sheet roofing erected over an unpaved beaten earthen floor and mud walls. The dimension of the room was 41ft. by 25 ft. and there was an annexe that was pressed into use as a dressing room. The total number of participants at the beginning numbered forty-four with five women and the rest men, of whom two left during the very first week. The remaining forty-two men and women however, stayed on and actively took part in the proceedings till the conclusion of the workshop.

In the workshop itself, Badal Sircar went beyond teaching theatrical skills and techniques. Instead, he evolved and put to use a series of psycho-physiological exercises designed to develop the bodies and the minds of the actor-participants. At its most basic, this involved the employment of the concept of the "Circle" in which all participants were made to sit in a single circular line with no one sitting behind another. The construction of this circle created a sense of equality, team spirit and unity among the participants as everyone, including Sircar himself, became part of a continuous circumference. Next, Sircar started exercises focused on the relaxation of the muscles in the actors' bodies in order to teach them how not to move unnecessarily and how to stop their bodies from constraining themselves while acting. Voice exercises followed which taught the actors how to amplify their voices without putting undue stress on either their vocal chords or on the larynx.

There were even routines involving the exercise of the muscles in the face to help clear the sinuses. This was linked to the development of the

actors' articulatory skills – of pronunciation and voice projection. Next, there were exercises to remove psychological blocks leading to the suppression of sound. During these exercises the members were allowed to make any sound they wished to and whenever they so desired. Such practices had the positive effect of a removal of all types of psychological inhibition, and the result was that the workshop participants were empowered to initiate a free flow of ideas and images in their minds. Thus was begun the inner working of a journey within the mind leading to the expression of the inner self. Sircar also intentionally stressed on the importance of the destruction of the mask that all those who attended the workshop had, as human beings and social animals, been in the habit of putting on in their daily lives in the outside world. As Sircar himself was to write later, "the process of [the] removal of [the] mask is the process of genuine theatre, of direct communication as opposed to applying acting tricks and clichés and deceiving the audience by faking and pretending."<sup>4</sup> The radical thrust of this observation was based on Sircar's conviction that no theatre audience was ever fully convinced by the shows of imitation imposed upon them by the actors, but that they only accepted it as they had no other alternative.

Sircar's Manipur workshop also stressed upon the development of trust and teamwork. Many of his exercises were aimed at the removal of social phobia. Participants were trained to experience an environment created among themselves in which anyone could say or do whatever they wanted to without fear of ridicule or criticism. The development of trust amongst the participants was carried out through physical exercises such as making them jump down from a height of 6 feet to 9 feet into the waiting arms of six other participants standing in three groups of two each. In another exercise, one actor was asked to lie down on the ground, and another told to dive down on top of him or her. Simultaneously, another group member or a few of them were instructed to catch the diving person, but to extend their hands only after the actor who was the diver had started his or her fall. All these exercises contributed to the creation not only of feelings of mutual faith and trust among those attending the workshop, but also to the growth of their self-belief and confidence in themselves.

On the first four days, Badal Sircar's workshop in Imphal, Manipur ran for six hours every day, beginning at 8.30 a.m. and going up to 11.30 a.m. before being resumed in the afternoon for another three-hour sessions running from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Over these four opening days, the emphasis was placed on physiological and psychological games and exercises. Sircar deliberately refrained from speaking at any length or from lecturing before the participants. Refusing to allow anyone to address him as "Sir," he told them to call him "Badal-da" and he attempted to elicit reactions and responses from the workshop-members themselves. Following upon what he had learnt from American director Richard Schechner in 1971, this was done because his objective was not to explain but to encourage everyone to come up with questions on their own, questions which he could then briefly respond to. Sircar also encouraged the participants to put on display their individual talents in singing, dancing, miming and physical agility.

As part of the workshop process, Sircar also came up with the idea of mounting a version of his own play *Spartacus*. A work based on Howard Fast's novel of the same name, this play had been originally written in Bengali by Badal Sircar in 1972. Sircar had had it produced by his own theatre group Satabdi in Bengali and staged it for around a hundred times starting from January 1973. In Manipur, it was translated into the Manipuri language by the renowned Manipuri theatre personality Maharajkumari Binodini Devi and Sircar used the same production version that he had used in performing the play in the Open Theatre mode in Surendranath Park in Kolkata. The main reason why Badal Sircar chose to produce *Spartacus* as a training exercise was that it offered a scope for the involvement of all the theatre persons taking part in the workshop. Rehearsals began on 4th May 1973, and on each day around half the workshop time was given to rehearsals and the other half to workshop activities. Sircar clarified to all the participants that the aim was not the mounting of a finished production but the enactment of only a kind of work-in-process effort. Nevertheless the production came to be ready in only seventeen days and the final rehearsals were held on 17 May. After the gap of a day, the play was staged before an invited audience on 19 May 1973, before it was finally performed publicly on 21 May. This latter performance was held in a traditional Manipuri Kali Mandap, that is a

roofed space where such popular religious performances as Basanta Ras are performed in Manipur. The members of the audience were seated on mats laid on the floor, but there was an even larger crowd of uninvited people who stood around and watched the performance from a little distance.

Another theatre activity, apart from being motivated to stage *Spartacus*, which the workshop participants were encouraged in, was to prepare, produce and perform short “instant plays.” This procedure involved a workshop member calling upon some of his or her fellow-participants to prepare and to rehearse a play of approximately five minutes duration. The rules were that the time given for preparation would be ten minutes only, and that three or four teams had to work at the same time in different corners of the room before putting on their brief productions one after another. Sircar was strict in laying down that the instant play so generated had to be a sample of non-verbal theatre but not pantomime. Over the period of the 21 day workshop no less than thirty-two such brief plays were produced. No fewer than thirty workshop participants created their own plays, and these significantly included all the five women workshop members. On the day of the final rehearsal, six of these instant plays were presented before invited observers.

Badal Sircar himself was enriched by his Manipuri experience. The whole-hearted way in which the people of Manipur accepted his ideas and the success of his production of *Spartacus* here reinforced his conviction in the communicative effectiveness of Third Theatre. But this was not all, for his discussions with Manipuri theatre persons and above all his experience of watching Manipuri theatre arts like Jatra, Manipuri Basant Ras and the Lai Haraoba folk dances enriched his mind and contributed to the development of his ideas about theatre. Yet, no estimation of Badal Sircar’s Manipuri experience will be complete without taking note of the reminiscences of two of Manipur’s theatre personalities — Lokendra Arambam (b.1939) and He is nam Kanhailal (1941-2016). Both Arambam and Kanhailal were participants in Sircar’s Imphal workshop, the latter (as already noted) having served as Sircar’s assistant. It was Sircar who first gave him “the freedom to break out of the proscenium,

to do something different, to create new images”<sup>5</sup> Lokendra Arambam was to write later, “The earlier movement for alteration in theatre was an indigenous urge, in which form was not that important. But the complete departure from old traditional forms was something that Badal-da gave us; he gave us internal strength and a conscious ideology.”<sup>6</sup>

About Kanhailal, his co-participant in Sircar’s 1973 workshop, Arambam said that the former “was more inclined towards physical theatre. He went to Kolkata and worked with Badal-da, interacted with him closely.”<sup>7</sup> “I give him the respect of a guru,” Kanhailal himself stated about Badal Sircar, while confessing that “when I worked with him I could not fully grasp his concepts.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless he clarified that as he “learnt through all these experiences; the meaning came later.” According to Kanhailal, Sircar’s “Angan Manch [Third or Open Theatre] could vehemently defy the class consciousness and illusionism inherited by the proscenium, and locate his challenges to a social space where there was no class discrimination. He saw his Third Theatre as that which allowed communication to flow to the expected audience intimately and directly. I received his practice as my wordless experience, and began to articulate it later in the process of forming my own practice systematically.”<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note however that Sircar’s impact on Manipuri theatre went even beyond influencing and inspiring its leading lights. In an effort to introduce Badal Sircar to a wider Manipuri reading public, Maharajkumari Binodini Devi (1922 -2011) of Yaiskul, Imphal, translated and published Sircar’s iconic play *Evam Indrajit* in her own mother tongue. This was apart from the translation of Sircar’s *Spartacus* that she had done for Sircar’s use in his Imphal workshop. Though this *Evam Indrajit* translation which was given the title *Amasung Indrajit*, was not published till 1989, it had been performed much earlier in 1973 by the Rup Raga theatre group of Manipur in a production directed by Aribam Shyam Shama, who himself played the role of Lekhak in the production. The other important role of Manasi in the drama was played by the Manipuri actress Yengkhom Roma. About her translation, Binodini Devi said that “It was not very difficult for me to translate his *Evam Indrajit* into my mother tongue, but I am not sure about how close I have got to

the original play *Evam Indrajit*. The difficult part for me was to translate his [Badal Sircar's] poems because he is a gifted poet whereas I am not." (my trans.)<sup>10</sup> This frank declaration notwithstanding, it is not difficult to appreciate how the genius of a Bengali dramatist came to touch the minds and hearts of the people of Manipur.

**Notes**

1. London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company Limited, 1896.
2. *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 15, Calcutta: Govt. of West Bengal, 2000, p. 734.
3. First published by the Indian Society of London in 1913. Subsequently, republished and reprinted in 1914 by The MacMillan Company, New York.
4. Sircar, Badal. *Nirbachito Prabandha Samgraha*. Natya Chinta, 2014, p. 180.
5. Arambam, Lokendra. "Working for Change." *Theatre in Manipur Today*, edited by Anjum Katyal. Calcutta: Seagull, 1997, p. 33.
6. *Ibid*.
7. Kanhaialal, H. "Theatre is only a link between heritage and community." *Theatre in Manipur Today*, edited by Anjum Katyal. Calcutta: 1997, p. 45.
8. *Ibid*, p. 45.
9. Kanhaialal, Heisnam. "An Encounter with Badal Sircar." *Badal Sircar: Search for a Language of Theater*, edited by Kirti Jain. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016, p. 350.
10. Devi, Binodini, translator. "Preface" *Amasung Indrajit*. Imphal: 1989.

## **Representation of the Aboriginal System of Kinship and its Effect on Aboriginal Women: A Reading of Jack Davis's Plays**

**Swati Roy Chowdhury**

Jack Davis is hailed as the most prolific playwright, poet and activist of Aboriginal rights in post-1967 Australia. His plays like *Kullark*, *No Sugar* and *The Dreamers* delineate the negative effects of Colonial settlement in Australia. Among many other strategies that Davis has taken in his plays, an important one is to promote pre-settlement Aboriginal ways of life as a means of resistance to the imposed colonial ways of sustenance. Of the various features of Aboriginal living Davis seemed to be particularly fond of the idea of kinship that was traditionally a feature of most Aboriginal societies.

The present paper explores instances of kinship from Davis's plays and analyse them to interpret how Davis has used them to counter colonial propositions. However the paper will mainly focus on the central issue from a feminist point of view with special emphasis on the effect of such system and its subsequent absence upon Aboriginal women.

“...in Aboriginal societies the family structures and the sets of rights and obligations underlying them are extended to the whole society. As an individual moves out from the immediate family to the local group and to the total linguistic group, he or she is able to identify all other members of the groups by the same relationship terms which apply in the family. Terms usually applied to lineal relatives are used to refer also to collateral relatives. This is made possible by the application in Aboriginal societies of what is called the Classificatory System of Kinship.” (n.pag)

From the above comment made in the website *Working with Indigenous Australians* one gets a rudimentary idea about the importance of kinship in Aboriginal society. For an Aboriginal, a family is not restricted to immediate blood and/or matrimonial relation but it extends to incorporate an entire community.

Structurally, a society which practices kinship as a fundamental principle believes in the equivalence of same-sex siblings. According to this principle, people who are of the same sex and belong to the same sibling line are viewed as same. Thus two brothers are deemed to be equivalent. If one has a child, that child views not only his biological father as father but applies the same term to the father's brother. The same principle applies to two sisters with both being mothers to any child either one bears. As a father's brother is also identified as father, the latter's children will be brothers and sisters, rather than cousins. This system is known as the classificatory system of kinship because all members of the larger group are classified under the relationship terms. There is no need to expand the range of classifications or relationship terms. Several people are identified by an individual within each classification. Thus a person has several fathers, several mothers, and many brothers and sisters. A mother's brother, being on the same sibling line but of the other sex, is identified as an uncle. Similarly a father's sister becomes an aunt (Edwards, 1988:48-49)

The arrival of settlers, however, altered this basic social structure much to the inconvenience of the Aborigines. Almost every Aboriginal family knew of relations who were removed as children and put into European custody. Aboriginal people referred (or, still refer) to them as "taken" or "stolen". The effects of such strategies and observances are still echoing in the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal adults who were taken away from their families as children experienced difficulties to adjust without having an Aboriginal family supported infancy. Willing to join their own people, and yet not being able to do so some developed serious identity crises. In the settlements they had been raised to think "white" and "be like white people". To gain acceptance in Aboriginal society they had to learn values and rules anew and in many cases they also had to overcome negative views of their Aboriginal heritage taught in the settlements.

Jack Davis, being an ardent votary of the Aboriginal ways of life, he believed that one productive way to counter the settler-colonial strategies would be to preach among the newer generations of Aborigines the worth of such social structures. In his plays such ideas proliferate. For example in *No Sugar* the character of Gran Munday is an ardent believer in the goodness of the system of kinship. It is her deep-rooted faith in the aboriginal kinship system that makes Gran feel for Mary the same way she had once felt for her own daughter Milly, when the latter was pregnant with Joe. This spirit of kinship is traceable in not only the Munday-Millimurra family, but in every Aboriginal family that Davis presents in his plays. Thus, it is quite common in Davis's plays to note the presence of characters who are either distant relations or do not have any biological and/or matrimonial relations with a given family, but they dwell with the same and are taken care of by the women of the family like anyone else.

In *The Dreamers* Eli is a distant cousin of Dolly and her family, but they cohabit and share each other's private belongings like comb (11). In *Barungin* the family observes the last rites of Eli when he dies (5). In *Honey Spot* the small Winnalifamily consisting of Mother and her son Tim is also joined by a cousin named William. From Mother both William and Tim receive equal attention and equal care, and in reciprocation she is helped by both of them to run the family. William makes Aboriginal musical instruments that are sold and the money obtained that way is used in running the house (14). When William starts earning he buys a present for Mother (62). In *In Our Town*, a play set at a much later time at the backdrop of the Second World War this trend of kinship continues as one finds that David proposes to take Uncle Harbie, a distant relative along with them in their new house, when they shift from the camp (17). More such examples are to be found which could suggest the nature of Aboriginal familial bonding. What is important is to understand the effects that such family-ties have on Aboriginal men and women.

Richard Broome is of the opinion that in this kinship system women were valued not as subservient to men but as partners. Interdependence of men and women ensured that no one was viewed as inferior to the other, but inseparable and indispensable part of a unity. Though the society was patrilineal and after marriage women lived in the territory of their

husbands, they did enjoy considerable rights and privileges. They were needed to carry out important functions like child birth and rearing. Moreover, in the economic sphere too men and women had their own distinct set of functions. While the men hunted animals, the women gathered agricultural produces. They both manufactured trade items and implements; thus contributing in their own distinct ways for the functioning of their economy. Apart from this, elderly women enjoyed enough power and respect; and many a time children were taken care of by elderly women who would also teach them Aboriginal values and culture (23).

Echoes of Broome's observations proliferate in Davis's plays in spite of the fact that in them most families live away from their original Indigenous habitations in the West-constructed settlements where the actual setup of an Aboriginal society would not be easily available to them. In spite of that the memories of Indigenous life conveyed through elderly figures like Uncle Worru (*The Dreamers*) or Gran Munday (*No Sugar*) keep alive the remnants of antique Aboriginal culture and ethos that valued women as equally important as men in the existing social structure. I argue that in the opening song of Worru such an idea is reflected when he mentions 'Meal times' and 'corroboree' with equal importance. If one takes a look at the two different stanzas in which these two words/phrases are embedded one understands the validity of the argument made in the preceding sentence. The earlier part of the song reads:

Billy Kimberley used to corroboree  
there weekends  
for a tin of Lucky Hit  
thenshare it with friends (7)

The next relevant stanza reads:

Meal times,  
Bella putting the damper like a golden moon  
from the ashes of the fire,  
then sharing the last of the bacca,

some with clay pipes

and others rolling (8)

If one considers the diction of these stanzas carefully, one is sure to find that sharing of tobacco or bacca is common between both. This is a usual Aboriginal way of reciprocating happiness. It is pertinent to notice that in the first instance it is a corroboree- an event when Aboriginals interact with the Dreamtime through dance and music- by the aboriginal ‘bloke’ Bill Kimberley<sup>1</sup> that initiates such jubilation. In the second instance the reference is to a ‘meal time’ and the meal is being prepared by Bella. Interestingly, this daily act evokes the same after-event. What I intend to point out here is that a nostalgic old man like Worru- who attaches great importance to Aboriginal customs and rituals- equates an important Aboriginal ritualistic performance with a routine ritual of having food. This equation creates a possibility of a similar kind of comparison between the agents behind these actions viz. Billy Kimberley and Bella- one a man and other a woman. And yet in their propensity to generate pleasing moments for Aborigines no one is lesser than the other. Moreover, a careful notice of the phonetic similarity between the names used for these two agents further betrays Davis’s intention to put people from both genders in the same pedestal. ‘Billy’ and ‘Bella’ have the same consonants (/b/ and /l/) and both of them use lip spread variety of vowels. These make them almost rhythmic in utterance. I find this rhythmic harmony to be an indicator of the general harmony of the Aboriginal society where the hierarchical positioning of gender had been done away with considerably.

If it is their allegiance to kinship that makes the aboriginal people strong as communities, it is the absence of this close-knit familial structure that they pine for in post-settlement Aboriginal societies. A case in point would be Rosie Yorla (*Kullark*), whose longing for a big Aboriginal family is evident from the way she mentions her old acquaintances to Alec viz. Auntie Peg and Uncle Eli. The very fact that these two people live with “Libby and Joe and all the kids”(9) evokes a sense of incompleteness in her because she lives in a house with only her husband and her occasionally visiting son Jamie. As a matter of fact Rosie’s

yearning for the life she has lived among her Aboriginal people is made more explicit in her visit to the funeral of an unnamed old Aboriginal man. Though primarily it is their proximity with the departed man which have brought them together for the funeral; the other reason is, as Alec has said, in funerals one “get to see people yaain’t see people yaain’t seen for a long time”(9). Rosie supports Alec in this as this is the world view that has shaped general Aboriginal temperament for long.

It is this stress on unity of a family structure that has infused in Aboriginal people, especially in Aboriginal women, a deep sense of caring for others, since traditionally women spent more time at home and with the families than the male members. The concept of a family developed out of kinship has expanded the limits of their care-giving to people beyond blood relations. Unsurprisingly, therefore, in an assimilated society an Aboriginal woman’s care-giving is extended to White people as well. The racial differences could not completely wipe out the humane attitude that has always allowed Aboriginal women to consider outsiders of the family as their own.

Unlike the benevolent white women mentioned in Davis’s plays, these affectionate Aboriginal women are non-professionals. Their services are humble and unorganized and yet not lacking in innate goodness and humane empathy that are necessary to carry these out. Davis is a supporter of this genteel humanity and believes that every good thing must be endured and perpetuated. This can be achieved only when such things are taught to children from an early age. Thus in *Honey Spot* we come across the character of the Mother who embodies such benevolence. In spite of knowing that the Ranger is a threat to her and her family’s existence she extends her helping hands towards Peggy, the Ranger’s daughter. Not only does and her family help the White girl to complete her dance project, she also shows an excellent understanding of the adolescent White girl’s mind in a way no one else does:ho

MOTHER: She’s a nice girl, and a lonely one.

WILLIAM: What’s she got to be lonely for?

MOTHER: Lots of people are lonely, especially wadjellas. (22)

All the qualities of Aboriginal women mentioned already have made them acknowledgeable as important members in their society. This has enabled them to have considerable say in their families too. In fact Davis has shown some instances of constructive matriarchy operating at the domestic level in Aboriginal families. For examples in the first act of *No Sugar* when Jimmy and Sam lock themselves up in a fight it is Gran's intervention that stops them:

GRAN: Don't you hit him, Sam.

SAM: I will if he bites me.

GRAN: I'll stop you two fellas.

*She charges at them, grabbing both by the hair and pulling viciously. They separate and she falls on her backside. MILLY laughs.(25)*

The fight not having stopped there, Gran has to employ more of her power to stop them and she continues to apply force till the men actually quit the brawl. In the following action we find Milly too beating up her brother Jimmy for drinking (25). In another example from *Honey Spot* when Peggy and Tim quarrel with each other and part their ways, it is the Mother who intervenes and aids in a reconciliation between the two. (54-57). For the present paper what is more relevant in these actions than the show of mental differences and physical violence is the extent to which Aboriginal women have shown control over the male members of their house. This authority comes from an allegiance to the old Aboriginal customs and mores that viewed women as important.

The system of kinship, therefore, had served not only to strengthen the Aboriginal communities, but it has also promoted equality among as well as equal importance to all genders. Advent of European modes of family values had tried to discard the Aboriginal family values simultaneously negating indigenous systems as defunct. Therefore, reviving the Aboriginal systems had served as a preferred way to counter the colonial strategy of subjugation. Theatre being a very important medium for public communication, Davis has explored this medium well to convey to the world the truth of Aboriginal society and lives.

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## Note

1. This character has found reference in Jack Davis's *No Sugar* as well. He is a black tracker and as Worru recalls in a later part of the play, he and Bluey are 'evil' Aboriginals. It is in this light that they have been portrayed in *No Sugar* too.

## **The concluding song of *Twelfth Night* and its translations in Bengali**

**Shamsad Nahar**

Songs and music are central in Shakespeare's plays. They are essential for Rabindranath and Brecht's plays too. Shakespeare like other major Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights used various musical forms in his plays like Madrigals, Airs, lyrical chants, dramatic dialogue set to folk tunes. Music and song are essential to Shakespeare's comedy (*Twelfth Night, As You Like It, Merchant of Venice*), Tragedies (*Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth*) the Last plays and the Histories (*Tempest, Winter's Tale, the Henryriad*). *Twelfth Night* begins with Duke Orsino and the Courtiers listening raptly to an unnamed song by an unnamed singer: "If music be the food of love, play on ... There's that stain again" (Duke Orsino's opening lines).

In the 2005 World Shakespeare's Conference in Calcutta The Shakespeare Society of Eastern India Choir led by Shreela Roy, Shima Mukherjee and Suklasen chose to sing a renowned Elizabethan number to represent that unnamed song. They chose "Green Sleeves is my only love, Green Sleeves my one delight" a much sung traditional folk song of the period, though it is usually attributed to male singers.

*Twelfth Night* thus begins and ends with music and song concluding with Feste's curtain number, "When that I was and a little tiny boy". My focus in this paper are three versions of Feste's song in three Bengali transcriptions using a comparative perspective: 1. Asok Guha's 1960 version (Biswas Publishing House) 2. Sudhanshuram Ghosh's 1986 version (Tulikalom) 3. Dattatreya Dutt's 2003 version (SSEI and Avantgarde Press). All these modern transcriptions were made in post-Independence India.

I will begin with Feste's song in the original English as found in the Arden Shakespeare. This would be followed by a comparative analyses of Guha, Ghosh and Dutt's versions re-produced in Roman script by me.

Feste's song in English:

When that I was and a little tiny boy,  
With hey-ho, the wind and the rain;  
A foolish thing was but a toy,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man's estate,  
With hey-ho, the wind and the rain;  
'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came, alas, to wive,  
With hey-ho, the wind and the rain;  
By swaggering could I never thrive,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came unto my beds,  
With hey-ho, the wind and the rain;  
With tosspots still had drunken heads,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

A great while ago the world began,  
With hey-ho, the wind and the rain;  
But that's all one, our play is done,  
And we'll strive to please you every day.

**Ashok Guha's Version:**

"Choto chilam jokhon ami bhai re  
Tokhon batas-brishti boito jore.

Khelna chhilo bokami more  
Jhorto badal roj din bhor.  
Heiyo heiyo – heiyo.  
Jokhon elo joubon re bhai  
Sno-sno batas-badal sain-sain  
Chor bhebey bhai duyar dilo entey  
Roj brishti jhur jhurie more matha kute.  
Jokhon elo bouti re bhai  
Sno, sno batas-badal sain sain  
Moder neshai bibhor hoye kat to na din  
Furfuriey  
Roj brishti jhorto tokhon jhorjhoriey  
Jokhon jetam shoyone bhai  
Badal batas sain sain  
Tokhon nesha lagto lege, kat to amar chotfotiey  
Roj brishti asto tokhon jhorjhoreiy.  
Onek din holo  
Dunia shuru holo  
Badal to namlo bhai  
Batas bohe sain sain  
Jak ge se kotha  
Neik matha byatha  
Amar pala furalo  
Notey gachti muralo  
Amra abar asbo  
Roj Khushi korbo  
Sno, sno badal batas namey re  
Sain sain jai re.”

***Commentary:***

The first thing to note about Guha's transcreation is that he does not always follow the repetition of the second and fourth line of the original English. He translates the same line of the original in several different ways. In Shakespeare the second line in each stanza goes "With hey ho, the wind and the rain". In Guha this has become "Tokhon batas-brishti boito jore; Sno-sno batas-badal sain-sain; Badal batas sain sain." He again repeats this refrain at the close. Shakespeare has rhymed the end-words of the first and the third lines in each stanza: boy-toy, estate-gate etc. Guha does not follow this verse pattern. He rhymes the end words of every two lines of each stanza: bhaire-jorey, more-bhore etc. Nonetheless Guha's use of colloquial language permeated with rhythmic beauty is commendable.

In the original there is no "bhaire" because Feste is not addressing or talking to any of his brothers. He is presenting the song to and addressing the patrons and audience of mixed class that have come to the theatre. Guha has completely erased the Shakespearean resonance and bitter-sweet wit in the word "alas": "But when I came, alas, to wive". Feste's witty attack on marriage is completely missed by Guha. In the last line it seems that Feste is running away, "jaiyre" in fear of the "sno-sno batas" that is building up to a gales storm. This may be amusing but the complex mood of this song is missing. We can certainly praise Guha for adding a touch of Indian narrative and folk tradition in "Amar pala furalo/Notey gachti muralo". This line is not there in the original. Only "our play is done". Guha has effected a beautiful Indianization or Bengalization using what is there in our folk songs and fairy tales which always end with such aphoristic couplets.

Twenty years after Guha we get Sudhanshuranjan Ghosh's transcreation:

Jokhon ami chotto chhilam  
Jhor badole mete  
Kheltam roj kotoi khela  
Birol anondete.

Kintu jokhon boro holam  
Dekhlam jogot take  
Khelna khela sango kore  
Dukkho sukher fanke.  
  
Ei jogoter kothay shuru  
Kothai je tar shesh  
Janbo na to tenei jabo  
Shudhui sukher resh.”

**Commentary:**

Ghosh has not attempted a line by line translation, but has more or less given his version of the first four lines and the last four lines of the original.

Perhaps because the play is categorised as comedy, Ghosh has made the song reflect and express a simple joyousness: “Shudhui sukher resh”.

Shakespeare’s mature love-game comedies like AYLI, TN, MV do end with weddings, dances and joy all around. But a trace of melancholy persists intermingling the ‘gay and grave’ as Dr. Jonson 200 years ago had told us: “Shakespeare writes neither Comedies or Tragedies...but a kind of ‘mingled drama’” where comic and tragic scenes are juxtaposed as in *Hamlet and King Lear*. Shakespeare’s plays like life, are not monochromatic but has plurisignificance where good-evil, joy-sorrow, happiness-misery, black-white, light- darkness are present. Feste’s song, simply and memorably express this ambivalence and duality of life. Ghosh makes it, “Shudhui sukher resh.”

Certainly Ghosh’s fragmentary transcreation is poetic, musical and attractive to the ear but fails to touch the core of feste’s song.

Nearly two decades after Ghosh Dattatreya Dutt (2003) gives us his wonderful version:

“Jokhon chilam ami chotto khoka  
Aha ha re sei badol jhore

Keu kheyal koreni koto chhilam boka  
Arey brishti to borshai roj i pore.

Jokhon holam boro boyos kale  
Aha ha re sei badol jhore  
Chor chanchor thekato loke khil shikole  
Arey brishti to borshai roj i pore

bou elo, hai, holo ghorkonna  
Aha ha re sei badol jhore  
Dekhi bukni diye to ar pet chole na  
Shudhu brishti to borshai roj i pore.  
Jokhon shulam sheshe bansher dolay

Aha ha re sei badol jhore  
Dekhi Mataler moto nesha choreche mathay  
Tobu brishti to borshai roj i pore.

Duniyar shuru koto bochor a-ge  
Aha ha re sei badol jhore  
Tar nei uddesh, aaj pala holo shesh  
Jeno roj tomader di hriday bhore.

***Commentary:***

Like his predecessors Dutt has used excellent colloquialism in translating from the original. But unlike Guha and Ghosh he has translated every word and line of the song in his own creative way. He has successfully retained the rhyme-scheme and the structural rhythmic pattern of the song—a most singular achievement. Whatever hints, puns and suggestive resonances are there in Shakespeare, Dutt has managed to capture most of them and sometimes gone better than the original. For example Feste's "But when I came unto my beds" becomes in Dutt "Jokhon shulam sheshe bansher dolay". Here "my bed" becomes "bansher dolay". A wonderful stroke by Dutt where "bansher dolay" stands for the fool's cot (he can afford nothing better than bamboo poles tied together with

ropes-“khatiya” in hindi and bangla) and for the corpse carrying cot used in India.

The word swaggering in the original always poses problems for translators. Ghosh has just left it untranslated. Dutt could have used phrases like *Bar-fattiy or humbora bhav*. But rejecting such dramatic turns of speech Dutt uses the much used popular ‘slang’ word “Bukni” for swaggering.

Dutt’s translation is not just a beautiful and faithful transcreation but goes beyond to become an autonomous poem and original song and a piece of undying Art like Feste’s song itself.

Dutt’s transcreation surpasses every other translation of Shakespeare in the Bengali language done during the last 1500 years.

### ***Production History:***

All these songs in the original English and in Guha, Sudhansuranjan and Dutt’s transcreations have been regularly sung by The Shakespeare Choir between 1985 and 2019. The songs by Shakespeare Choir was compered by Ananya Chatterjee and repeatedly telecasted over Calcutta Doordarshan during the 1980s and 1990s especially on Shakespeare’s Birthday. The singers included Shreela Roy, Banani Ghatak, Debasish Chattopadhyay, Prodosh Bhattacharya, Pradyut Ganguly, Shima Mukherjee et al. The choir presented these songs in all the Shakespeare World Conferences in Kolkata held bi-annually from 2000 onwards and received much acclaim.

The staff notations were taken from the Penguin Editions of each Shakespeare plays and W. H. Auden’s collection of Elizabethan Song and Music which the choir Indianized in their presentations.

## **The History of War-plays: A Brief (International) Exploration**

**Pinaki Roy**

The history of war and conflict is as old as that of human civilisation itself. Ever since human beings began to evolve, they have had been fighting one another over issues such as territory, food, sexual partners, and conflicts of interest. Cave-paintings from the Aurignacian-Perigordian Age in southern France (at Cougnac and Pech Merle), which are approximately 30,000 years old, show human beings piercing one another with arrows (Gregor 103). From the pre-historic cemetery-site in the Nile Valley – Jebel Sahaba in northern Sudan – skeletons of people who were killed in war approximately 14,000 years ago – have been recovered in 1964 (Otterbein 75). The first war in recorded history is supposed to have had taken place in Mesopotamia around 2700 B.C. between Sumer (near Iraq) and Elam (in modern-days' Khuzestan) (Di Leo 66): the Sumerians defeated the Elamites in this war. Since then, each and every civilisation has had grown through wars and conflicts. Naturally, the documentation of human conflicts is as important as the human experiences of the conflict. War-writings began as military-history by Herodotus (484 B.C. – 425 B.C.) and Thucydides (460 B.C. – 400 B.C.), and, later, came to include genres like drama (from 421 B.C. onwards), poetry (for example, an unidentified writer published “The Tale of Igor’s Campaign” in the late-12<sup>th</sup> century), and novels (17<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). Such documentations serve principally three purposes: first, they help the human beings to reread and review the histories of war so that the engagements could be avoided in near future; second, they help the thinking individuals to precisely perceive the umpteen number of miseries human beings have had to face while living in hostile situations, and, third, they help the strategists to plan the assaults in a more fool-proof-manner than their previous manoeuvrings.

The literary writers – however – are more concerned with the first two ‘purposes’ of war-writings than anything else.

It should be mentioned that the sub-genre of war-dramas (or plays about violence and conflict) predate war-poems and war-novels by approximately one thousand and six-hundred years. Aristophanes is popularly considered to be the first litterateur who began to seriously examine issues related to the disasters of war and the importance of peace in his plays like *Peace* (c. 421 B.C.) *Lysistrata* (c. 411 B.C.), and *The Frogs* (c. 405 B.C.), and this assumption has been confirmed by Charles Taliaferro and Michel Le Gall (Reid and Austin 246). However, as is revealed in *The Frogs*, Aristophanes’s approach to conflict was not an outrightly-hostile one. He was in favour of peace (Oliver Taplin categorically refers to his anti-bellucose-stance<sup>1</sup>) – but he advocated military engagements in times of dire need. Such almost-inscrutable stances – naturally – complicated his attitude to war and militarism in the plays. For example, the readers – even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – are confused about the Athenian playwright’s real concern – war or peace – when, writing about how the middle-aged strategist, Trygaeus, has had miraculously ended (for the time being) the *Peloponnesian War* (431 B.C. – 404 B.C.) between Athens and Sparta – in *Peace*, Aristophanes shows how peacetime puts a large number of merchants out of all-profitable business. *Peace* was written after the Athenians – led by Cleon (d. 422 B.C.) – defeated the Spartans at the *Battle of Sphacteria* in 425 B.C., but it ends – though humorously – with an implicit warning that peacetime-economics is a far-more-complicated-issue-to-ponder-over than the economic conditions of wartime Athens. In *Lysistrata*, a group of socially-conscious and frustrated Athenian women – led by Lysistrata and her friend Calonice – convince their fellow Athenian-women to abstain from sexual contact with their male counterparts unless they separated themselves from the crowd participating daily in the *Peloponnesian War*. Even as the play ends on a humorous note showing the forced negotiation between a sex-starved Spartan and a sex-starved Athenian general, Aristophanes seems to ponder over whether the ideas of surrendering to passion and those related to the maintenance of peace are practically viable in the long run. In *The Frogs*, however, Aristophanes takes a more pragmatic approach to militarism.

Recalling (through Dionysus) how the family-life-focussing-plays of Euripides (480 B.C. – 406 B.C.) have made Athenians reluctant in participating in the defence of Athens during the *Peloponnesian War*, and how the heroism-exalting plays of Aeschylus (523 B.C. – 456 B.C.) would have ‘inspired’ them to fight, Aristophanes forwards his credo: ‘when war comes a-knocking on the door, one must fight rather than ignoring it in order to avoid annihilation’.

While reading *Lysistrata*, modern-day-readers can hardly avoid comparing the themes of the play with those discussed in the British dramatist Peter Whelan’s *The Accrington Pals* (1981) (written 2392 years later), which has been described by *The Guardian* as being ‘one of the best plays ever about the First World War’<sup>2</sup>. Heinz Kosok appreciates the easy manner in which the 1981-production blends its ‘documentary side’ with the playwright’s identifiably anti-war-stance (138). Whelan (1931-2014) named his play after the British Army-*pals battalion*, ‘the 11<sup>th</sup> Service Battalion (Accrington), East Lancashire Regiment’, which was raised in south-eastern England during the 1914-18 Great War, and whose ‘members’ were killed *en masse* by the Germans within a few minutes on the very first day of the *Battle of the Somme* (1 July-18 November 1916) in northern France. In his *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes had tried to show how the women felt like when their male counterparts left them in uncertain futures to participate in war. When an engagement could annihilate over 18000 (principally) Athenian soldiers (Strauss 80) as early as in (431-404) B.C. – when the population of the entire Greek Empire was approximately 3.5 million (Serval and Tranie 14) – the anxieties of women, whose jingoistic husbands or partners left them to participate in a war of ‘prestige’ than of ‘real causes’, is easily comprehensible. Whelan’s focus, in *The Accrington Pals*, is a similar one: he shows the experiences of the common and hapless soldiers on the front during the *Battle of the Somme*, and contrasts their experiences, horrors, and miseries with those of the British women left behind at their Accrington-residences in the borough of Hyndburn (in Lancashire, England). In a battle (the Somme) which caused 0.42 million British casualties within its 140-day-span (approximately 3000 British casualties per day) (Sheldon 398), the mental condition of the relatives waiting for them back in England could be easily guessed.

The March 1984 *Bench Theatre*-reviewer of Whelan's production wrote:

“*The Accrington Pals* is a moving and hard-hitting play set in Accrington during the first few years of the First World War. [...] *The Accrington Pals* follows the story of the innocent and enthusiastic men who volunteered their services to their country after Horatio Herbert Kitchener's calls for a *New Army*. Their experiences of life on the Western Front are contrasted with the women who are left behind in Accrington, women who come together as friends when facing financial, social and sexual deprivation, as well as being thrown into the social changes that came along with the absence of many men. The main characters, too, are contrasted; May, as independent, hard-working, fruit and vegetable-stall holder, Tom, her lodger, as optimistic and idealistic and Eva, May's trusted and generous confidante and sweetheart of Ralph. The play has fun and light-hearted moments, which are starkly contrasted with the terrifying reality hundreds of men faced at the Battle of the Somme in 1916”<sup>3</sup>.

One of the latest war-plays that has had gained widespread critical attention, Whelan's *The Accrington Pals* provides the paradigm for almost all the modern dramas on military engagements: helplessness of common soldiers, anxiety of women left back at home, unpalatable experiences of the warriors at the front, selfishness of comrades, errors and blunders committed by the military commanding officers, sufferings and destructions, and the overall futility of killings.

In the history of war-plays, Aristophanes is perhaps one of the earlier writers, if Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (both composed approximately in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) are to be considered as ‘epic poems in dactylic hexameters’. But Aristophanes's war-plays were rivalled by the poignant brilliance of *The Trojan Women* (c. 415 B.C.) composed by Euripides of Salamis. Occurring as the last play of Euripides's Trojan-war-trilogy – the other two being *Alexandros* and *Palamedes* – *The Trojan Women*, rather than focussing on the rape of the Trojan women by victorious Greek military-men and the plundering of the defeated city-state (presently in western Turkey) after a 12<sup>th</sup>-century war between the Asians and the Europeans, was actually based on the 416 B.C.-destruction of the city-state of Melos (a Greek island in the Aegean Sea) by the

Athenians, and their colonisation of the city-state. During the 416 B.C.-siege, the Athenians killed all the adult men of Melos, sexually assaulted the women, and thereafter sold them and their children as slaves (Renfrew and Wagstaff 49-52). Between 415 B.C. and 413 B.C., the Athenians – under the command of Nicias, Lamachus, and Eurymedon – led a military expedition to Sicily with approximately 15000 people, most of whom were killed by the Spartans, Corinthians, and Syracusians. This decisive victory by the Peloponnesian League over the Athenians impacted the Athenian politics considerably, and led Euripides to compose a pathetic play on the dangers and futilities of military-engagements. The Trojan Women is also important as far as literary history is concerned: it was the first play to be produced with a distinctive anti-war theme. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.-Europe, to be anti-belligose often amounted to be anti-government. But, Euripides – courageously – had put forward his own credo.

The sub-genre of war-plays – especially those written in English – did not have a significant contribution until the beginning of the First World War and onwards. It is not that the Periods of English Literature – like the Old English, the Middle English, the Renaissance, the Neo-classical, and the Victorian – were completely devoid of dramas on war. In fact, many of the plays written by the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights – especially those produced by Christopher Marlowe (1564-93), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), and Ben Jonson (1572-1637) – either had war as one of their sub-themes (for example, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, c. 1587, and Shakespeare's *Othello*, c. 1603 – other than the 'history'-plays). The heroic-plays of the Neo-Classical Period – for example, John Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* (1670-71), Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens* (1677), and Elkanah Settle's *The Virgin Prophetess* (1701) – also have serious military conflicts in the background. During the Romantic Period, however, war-themed plays were hardly written. During the late-Victorian period, however, George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1894) was produced to rave reviews for the first time at the *Playhouse Theatre*, Westminster. Though John Peck writes, rather dismissively, of the large number of 'patriotic English plays' which flooded the British stage in wake of the *Crimean War* (October 1853 – February 1856) (191), and though Shaw's *Arms and the Man* was written (based on the disastrous British cavalry-charge against the Russians during the

25 October 1854-Battle of Balaclava between the *Fedyukhin Heights* and the *Causeway Heights*) commemorating, satirically, the Crimean War, it does not deprive the production of its sheer poignancy and dazzling satire-smearred brilliance. In fact, the war-hating Major Bluntschli, the cowardly Sergius Saranoff, the (initially-war-loving) Raina Petkoff, the gruff and ‘homely’ Paul Petkoff, and the scheming Catherine Petkoff could be any of the numerous individuals around who have either pragmatic or confused impressions of belligerence. And, the ‘Battle of Slivnitza’ (original dates: 17-19 November 1885) could be any engagement which brings umpteen number of sufferings to the common soldiers. In the history of war-plays, therefore, *Arms and the Man* has found a mentionable niche.

The sub-genre of ‘war-plays’ or ‘war-dramas’ matured with the onset of the two World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which approximately (and respectively) 10 million (Kavanagh 1) and 60 million (Lightbody 268) people were killed, and uncountable numbers were grievously wounded. One of the earlier war-plays to have emerged out of the days following the First World War was Robert Cedric Sheriff’s *Journey’s End* (1928). Cedric’s play speaks of his first-hand-experiences: he was an English officer of the *East Surrey Regiment* (9<sup>th</sup> Battalion), who saw active service at Vimy Ridge and Loos, and was dangerously wounded at Passchendaele. With characters like ‘Captain Hardy’, ‘Lieutenant Osborne’, ‘Private Mason’, ‘Captain Stanhope’, and ‘Second Lieutenant Hibbert’, *Journey’s End* is set in the trenches of northern France for four days in mid-March 1918, and focuses on a section of British army-officers’ lives in the last few days before the German ‘Operation Michael’ (21 March – 5 April 1918).

Sheriff’s play was followed in the next year (that is, 1929) by Sean O’Casey’s famous anti-war drama *The Silver Tassie*. O’Casey (1880-1964) was an Irish writer who was deeply in collaboration with the Irish revolutionaries’ activities against the English ‘occupants’, and he used many of his plays to attack English imperialism. *The Silver Tassie* was no exception. Focussing on ‘Harry Heegan’, a common soldier to whom war is little more than a football-match, *The Silver Tassie* vituperatively attacks the misfortunes the imperialists’ love for militarism causes. It is a four-act-impressionist-play – focussing on the miseries of common warriors and the disillusionments of the veterans – which has become a part of the body of great Irish writings as well.

Noel Coward's *Post-mortem* (1930), a one-act-play-in-eight-scenes, is another of the famous war-plays commemorating the First World War. Coward (1899-1973), a homosexual-playwright, began writing plays as well as his homosexual love-affairs as the First World War was declared. He was conscripted into the *Artists Rifles* in 1918, but was discharged after nine months because of his tuberculin tendency. *Post-mortem* was first staged at a prisoner-of-war-camp in Eisenstadt, Austria, in 1944, fourteen years after it was written, and is set in France in 1917, with John Cavan, a young British soldier shot to death, appearing as a ghost in six of the eight-scenes. He 'understands' that his death in war has not mattered much to his parents and his beloved, and when his fellow-soldier (a war-survivor) Perry Lomas writes a book ('Post-mortem') about the mistreatment of the Great War-time-British soldiers, he 'discovers' that the books has also failed to produce the desired deterring effects. In the end, a frustrated Lomas shoots himself to death.

While William Somerset Maugham's *For Services Rendered* (1932) focuses satirically on the effects of the First World War on the family of the Ardsleys in Kent, the French dramatist, Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944), in his *The Trojan War will not take place* (1935; translated into English in 1955 as 'Tiger at the Gates' by Christopher Fry), outrightly criticises the politics of the French and international leaders whose murky and compromise-based politics shoved the world into the Great War and were providing impetus for the outbreak of the Second World War. In his 1935-play, Giraudoux – though he has had chosen the theme of the Trojan War as the background – appears to be prophetic: with his first-hand experiences of war during the 1914-18 conflict, and with his impeccable military-service-record (in 1915, he was the first writer to be awarded the wartime *Legion of Honour*), he exactly knew where the world was gradually heading to – under the machinations of the politicians. Maugham had his own war-experiences too – he served as a *Red Cross*-driver during the 1914-18 combat, and later worked for the English intelligence service. His experiences of war – understandably – were also not very endearing to him. *For Services Rendered* – understandably – ends in resignation and disillusionment – especially for people who have had given their best to protect their countrymen.

If the British and the Irish had distinguished themselves in producing war-, or rather, anti-war plays following the conclusion of the First World War, the Americans too were ‘mellifluous’ contributors. The history of the development of war-plays must include the contributions of such dramatists as Robert Sherwood (1896-1955; who fought with the *Royal Highlanders of Canada* during the Great War), Irwin Shaw (1913-84, who (unsuccessfully) volunteered to serve as a military-officer during the Second World War, 1939-45), Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007), Terence McNally (1938-2020 – a victim of *Covid-19*-complications), and David Berry (1943-2016). Sherwood’s *Idiot’s Delight* (1936) is set in one ‘Hotel *Monte Gabriel*’ in the Italian Alps, and almost accusingly, looks at the reactions and confusions of the guests who find themselves interned as a world war breaks out. Among the guests are Quillery, a French pacifist, Dr. Waldersee, a German physician, Achille Weber, a weapon-dealer, and the Cherrys, a British (honeymooning) couple. In Shaw’s expressionistic *Bury the Dead* (1936), six dead soldiers refuse to be buried, and each raises himself to express his anguish and futility. They refuse to be buried even when insisted by their relatives. In *William Reich in Hell* (1987), Wilson tries to show how issues like sex and jealous politics instigated the Nazis to burn the publications of the Austrian psychoanalyst (1897-1957). In McNally’s *Botticelli* (1968), set during the Vietnam War, the playwright focuses on the brutalities and inhumanness of war as two American soldiers kill a *VietCong* activist while playing the guessing-game of *Botticelli*. McNally’s *Bringing it all back Home* (1969), another Vietnam War-drama, catches Jimmy, slain in the Vietnam conflict, wondering why he died at all.

Finally, it must be mentioned that in the history of war-plays, the names of the Czech playwright Karel Capek (1890-1938) and the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) must be mentioned. Capek’s *The White Disease* (1937) was produced in the background of the German threat of aggression towards Czechoslovakia, and focuses on an unidentified whitening disease – probably some sort of leprosy – that is terrorising a small state in the throes of conflict. Set in the background of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), Capek’s *The Mother* (1938) is an anti-war-play in which pro-war men are torn between their ideas of ‘duty’ and their love for women who do not want them to fight and/or die.

Günter Grass (1927-2015) had also produced a number of plays with war in the background between 1956 and 1966, but his August 2006-revelations about his *Waffen-S.S.*-service during the Second World War considerably damaged his reputation, apparently taking the shine out of his 1999 *Nobel Prize for Literature*. If he was against the political domination and machinations, so was his senior German compatriot and leftist writer, Brecht, who constantly attacked war, militarism, and war-profiteering in many of the plays that he produced between 1933 and 1943. His *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939) – set in the background of the *Thirty Years' War* (1618-48), but is actually a savage attack on the German firms engaging in war-profiteering during the years prior to that of the Second World War, is perhaps one of the best anti-war plays to have been ever produced. Brecht's Characters like Anna Fierling, Kattrin, Eilif, and Schweizerkas have etched themselves permanently in the minds of people who are appalled by militarism.

Finally, it may be said that the genre of war-writings did not mature enough in India till date. Baren Basu (1916-80) from West Bengal and Dharamvir Bharati (1926-97) from Uttar Pradesh individually tried to develop the subgenre, but they were not very much successful. Nevertheless, the sub-genre of war-plays remains one of the more important literary sub-genres even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are several other writers and plays who have been left out – for example, the writer of “7 First World War Plays you might not know” (<https://pardonmyfrenchtheatreblog.wordpress.com/2014/08/06/7-first-world-war-plays-you-might-not-know/>) mentions John Wilson's *Hamp* (1964), Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme* (1985), and Nick Whitby's *To the Green Fields Beyond* (2000) as being among the better-written war-plays. However, what the present essay has attempted to do is to present an overall assessment of the history of the development of war-play as a literary sub-genre within a limited space.

**Notes:**

1. Taplin, Oliver. “Aristophanes”. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* 24 September 2015. Accessed on 20 October 2020 <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristophanes>>

2. “On Peter Whelan’s *The Accrington Pals*”. *Amazon.in*. Accessed on 20 October 2020 <<https://www.amazon.in/Accrington-Pals-Student-Editions/dp/147428566X>>
3. “Review of Peter Whelan’s *The Accrington Pals*”. *The Bench Theatre – Reviews*. Accessed on 20 October 2020 <<https://www.benchtheatre.org.uk/plays80s/accrington.php>>

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