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Vol. XXII

December–2024



Eds.

Subir Dhar, Tapu Biswas, Sheila T. Cavanagh, Papia Mitra

A

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The Shakespeare Society of Eastern India
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Subir Kumar Dhar

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In Memoriam

Shakespeare Society of Eastern India & Tagore-Gandhi Institute
mourns the passing away of



Amitava Roy
(1947–2024)

Professor Emeritus, Bankura University,
Former Shakespeare Professor & Head, Department of English,
Rabindra Bharati University,
Former Director, Shakespeare Centre for Advanced Research,
Rabindra Bharati University,
Executive President, Shakespeare Society of Eastern India,
Globally Renowned Theatre Director and Actor.
You left thousands of students and admirers disconsolate
on 12th April, 2024
Farewell and Rest in Peace after your journey's end.

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From the Editors' Desk

Theatre International Vol. (XXII – December 2024) begins with a paper from a scholar from Manipur. Dr. Pangeijam Sanjeevre interprets queen Gertrude in *Hamlet*, rejecting the enduring stereotype of a weak, lustful, disloyal woman. Surveying various critics down through the ages it argues Hamlet and the Ghost are unreliable narrators whose accusations skew readers' views. Close reading finds no evidence of infidelity. Instead, Gertrude's swift marriage to Claudius reflects a deliberate agenda: safeguarding herself, her son, and Denmark's stability amid the Fortinbras threat. Politically and personally, Claudius appears the most capable protector and perhaps even more 'manly' than Hamlet's father. Though her lines are few, Gertrude anchors the play's conflicts and decisions. Dr. Sanjeev argues that Gertrude emerges as a pragmatic, independent actor rather than a figure of moral frailty.

Dr. Tapu Biswas gives a comprehensive centenary survey of Badal Sircar (1925-2011), a revolutionary figure in Indian theatre. Born as Sudhindra Sircar in Kolkata, he transformed from a civil engineer to a pioneering dramatist who founded modern Indian theatre. Sircar revolutionised theatre by moving beyond traditional proscenium stages to create Open Theatre and Third Theatre movements. He took performances away from confined auditoriums to open spaces under the sky, making theatre accessible to rural and marginalised communities. His key contributions include over sixty plays like *Evam Indrajit*, *Sagina Mahato*, and *Spartacus*. He conducted transformative workshops across India and internationally, training social workers and empowering communities to create their own theatrical expressions about local issues. Biswas argues his theatre philosophy prioritized content over form, focusing on exposing social inequities and empowering the underprivileged.

Dr. Sujato Ghosh reads Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* as a dialogue

between flawed utopia and lived dystopia. Apparently easy feminist solidarity is complicated by difference over sisterhood. Across acts, Churchill's intertextuality and non-linear form stage clashing voices—Marlene's careerism, Angie/Joyce's working-class burdens, and hiring-room misogyny—to expose Thatcher-era individualism. Figures like Pope Joan and Nijo dramatise the psychic costs of navigating male hegemony, while interviews (Louise, Jeanine) reveal structural exclusion. Ghosh argues that the play critiques “equaling up” bourgeois feminism yet rejects one heroine; instead it maps heterogeneous, often competing feminisms inside late-capitalist patriarchy.

Dr. Arnab Chatterjee traces Shakespeare's journey from page to Tollywood screen, framed by adaptation theory and auteurism. Landmark moments include *Saptapadi's* staged *Othello*, Ghatak's *Komal Gandhar* invoking *The Tempest*, Vidyasagar's adaptation of *Comedy of Errors* transcreated onto film as *Bhranti Bilas*, the melodramatic *Shrimati Bhyankari* echoing *Taming of the Shrew*, Sen's *Arshinagar* recoding *Romeo and Juliet*. Chatterjee after analysis of these adaptations conclude that Tollywood directors recontextualize plots, images, and themes to address local markets and ideologies, making “Bengali Shakespeares” that privilege creative control over fidelity while negotiating universality, commerce, and culture.

Richa Gupta pairs Steele's *The Tatler* with his sentimental comedy *The Conscious Lovers* to show how page and stage co-produce middle-class morality. Through the persona of Isaac Bickerstaff, witty sketches of coxcombs and coquettes model reform via amusement; No. 207 redefines “gentleman” by conduct, not rank. Onstage, Bevil Junior's civility and self-command counter Cimberton's pedantry, redirecting comedy from libertine triumph to ethical sentiment. By aligning rhetorical strategies (humor, exemplarity) with performative ones (contrast, decorum), Steele's oeuvre trains readers/spectators in emotional regulation and public virtue. Gupta points out that in this way Steele through both mediums shaped both literary character and social character in early eighteenth-century Britain.

Dr. Renjini R reads *Ponman* through biopolitics. She argues dowry functions as population-level control over female subjectivity. Centered on Kollam's panapayattu—community fund-raising for bridal gold—the film tracks Steffi, Mariano, and Ajeesh through debt, violence, and gold-obsessed social scripts amplified by advertising. Despite legal bans, dowry persists via patriarchy, inheritance customs and greed for commodities, leading to sacrifices of other prospects and gendered harm. The narrative's climax—the main characters asserting educated self-worth—critiques performative patriarchy while exposing class/faith dynamics on Kerala's coast. The article shows how biopower performs through rituals, markets, and kinship, policing bodies and futures.

Dr. Sonia Ningthoujam feminist rereading of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* reframes its lyric romance as a drama of silencing and conditional recognition. Sakuntala's virtue is idealized, yet her speech is voided in court; legitimacy hinges on Dushyanta's memory (the ring), not her testimony—an instance of patriarchal epistemic violence. Kanva's injunctions script compliant womanhood; reunion restores order but reaffirms dependence on male authority. Drawing on Spivak and Irigaray, the essay exposes how symbolic elevation masks subordination: the heroine's patience and beauty are celebrated while agency is curtailed. Ningthoujam observes the play's power lies in this ambivalence—resilience yet ultimate reinscription within patriarchy.

Dr. Swati Roy Chowdhury analyses Anshuman Kar's *Vemular Ramayana* as rigorous textual dramaturgy that collapses mythic and modern time. Using Genette's analepsis/prolepsis and Bakhtin's chronotope, the play juxtaposes Shambuka's execution with Rohith Vemula's institutional death to expose the structural continuity of caste violence. Drawing on Ambedkar and Spivak, the essay argues the drama demonstrates not a system's failure but its designed success. By bracketing performance to foreground the script's time logic, it shows how the "Chronotope of Caste" binds epic injunctions to present bureaucratic exclusions. Chowdhuri argues that the play compels audiences to confront an unbroken politics of exclusion.

Samim Aktar Molla reads Poile Sengupta's *Alipha* as a feminist theatre of resistance. Through stark binaries—rich/poor, innocence/offence, power/powerless—the play stages a woman's defiance of patriarchal norms and highlights the necessity of women's solidarity. Split staging, contrasting lights, and dialogue between a Woman and a Man dramatise systemic asymmetries while refusing simple man-blaming; the aim is empowerment. Collective action, not lone heroism, counters violence and social ostracism. Molla sees *Alipha* as emblematic of gendered struggle, where voices, bodies, and alliances expose and resist everyday coercions in family and society.

Dr. Tilok Naskar examines Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* against India's history of communalism—from Partition to Babri Masjid's aftermath—tracking how riots recur across decades. Centering Hardika's diary and the Mob as Chorus, the study shows how memory, rumor, and grievance manufacture Hindu–Muslim antagonism inside domestic spaces. Contextualizing Dattani's writing process with Alyque Padamsee's prompt and Tazia-riot inspiration, Naskar argues the play dramatises cycles of suspicion, scapegoating, and state complicity. It anatomizes everyday bigotry and the fragility of secular ideals, asking whether intimate reconciliation can withstand entrenched narratives that repeatedly convert neighbors into enemies.

Shreya Sarkar explores “mad women” across Tennessee Williams's one-acts—*This Property Is Condemned*, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, *Portrait of a Madonna*, *Hello from Bertha*. Linking dramaturgical madness to Williams's biography (sister Rose, confinement anxiety), she traces motifs of delusion, institutionalization, and stigma as critiques of social abandonment. Characters like Willie exhibit grandiose delusions and survival strategies coded as pathology; stage directions and grotesque lyricism solicit compassion without sanitizing harm. Drawing on critics Sarkar distinguishes literary from clinical “madness,” showing how Williams converts marginal female suffering into a lens on class precarity, gendered policing, and fragile dignity.

Dr. Renjini R offers a biopolitical reading of Ponman (2025), arguing dowry practices regulate female subjectivity at population scale. Anchored in Kollam's panapayattu—community fundraising for bridal gold—the film's Ajeesh–Steffi–Mariano triangle reveals how legality (1961 Dowry Act) coexists with violent custom. Through Foucault's population governance and inheritance debates, the essay shows dowry scripting education, marriageability, and bodily risk, sustaining patriarchy despite Kerala's literacy reputation. Ponman dramatizes how gold economies, advertising imaginaries, and kinship surveillance turn women into managed assets; Steffi's refusal gestures to agency against performative patriarchy, yet exposes the costs of dissent.

Manvi Rai, Dr. Charu Yadav, and Ashish Dwivedi demonstrates how backstory heightens acting authenticity in *Marnoparant and 12 Angry Jurors*. Bridging Natyashastra's bhava-rasa with Stanislavski/Strasberg/Meisner methods, the authors combine rehearsal observation, performer reflections, and audience feedback. They found that the backstory scaffolds truthful impulses, clarifies ensemble relationships, and sustains emotional continuity in pauses and silences. Actors leverage autobiographical memory to locate motivations; audiences report greater believability. The paper recommends formalizing backstory work in Indian actor training, integrating Angika/Vachika/Aharya/Sattvika with Western affective preparation to connect text, embodied memory, and spectators' empathic reception.

Ashish Dwivedi and Charu Yadav surveys Lucknow theatre from Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to the present. They trace foundations of it in royal "Shahi Stage," dance-music drama, and through folk/Parsi influences, evolving venues, and later institutionalization (academies, auditoria). Using interviews with leading practitioners and archival fieldwork, the study maps shifts in forms, stagecraft, and publics—from ornate court spectacles to civic halls and community stages. It highlights pivotal groups/directors who globalized Lucknow's theatrical identity and shows how cultural institutions sustained training, repertory, and archives. Dwivedi and Yadav argues that the result is a diachronic portrait of a city where etiquette, music, and drama entwine.

Naren Mondal re-reads Utpal Dutt's *The Great Rebellion* through Marxist historiography, defending creative distortion as class truth. Blending fiction with 1857 events, Dutt indicts bourgeois histories and spotlights weavers, sepoys, and women as revolutionary agents. Scenes of mutilated artisans, unequal pay, and cartridge controversies expose colonial extraction and comprador betrayal. Characters like Heera and Lachman embody conflicted consciousness under imperial pedagogy, while dialogues insist revolt is collective pedagogy, not episodic riot. Theatre becomes counter-history: a mass platform that remembers anti-imperialist struggles, critiques post-independence compromises. Mondal concludes that the play rallies audiences toward materialist understandings of nation and resistance.

Dr. L. D. Easter Raj Densingh analyzes David Hare's *Stuff Happens* as documentary-drama hybrid that stages the Iraq War's prelude. Minimalist, ensemble performance and role-doubling foreground rhetoric over spectacle; manufacture of truths, diplomacy, and executive overreach are all analyzed. With Brechtian alienation—narration, direct address, shifting viewpoints—the play reframes political leaders as performers in a media theatre, inviting critical scrutiny rather than catharsis. Tracking Powell's UN speech, "dodgy dossier," and sidelined dissenters, Densingh argues the stage becomes civic forum, intervening in cultural memory and testing democratic accountability amid propaganda and moral crisis.

Shamshad Nahar speaks about how covid pandemic disrupted theatre performances as a live physical medium. So, when Shakespeare's plays were performed they had to be performed as a type of digital doubling. Physical space was no longer important, what mattered was connectivity. Yet at the same time the plays also managed to bring people out of their isolation. They also gained special traction as the themes often dealt with the body, contagion and epidemic. Nahar points out how the pandemic reinvented theatre mode itself and proved that even in such times Shakespeare is relevant and adaptable.

This volume ends with a joint paper by **Sri Amit Sarkar & Dr Preeti Pankaj Gupta** on how queer bodies and feminine souls are

depicted against the background of Bengali socio-cultural narratives in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada* and Kaushik Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan*. These films transform male femininity into a physical experience rather than an external show and consider its social and psychological relationship to gender non-conformity. Using a qualitative approach, this study integrates queer theory, gender studies, cinema studies, and close textual and visual analysis. It examines both internal and external tensions through plot, character arcs, acting, costume design, and cinematic space.

Happy Reading
Editors

Gertrude's Agenda: A Queen's Dichotomy in *Hamlet*

Pangeijam Sanjeev

Abstract

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* revolves round the theme of infidelity, betrayal and murder. Many critical works on the play focus on Hamlet's resentment towards Gertrude. Hamlet seeks to avenge the murder of his father upon Claudius. But his anger is vented on Gertrude. Her hasty marriage to his uncle has already disturbed and annoyed him even before he learns about the murder of his father from the Ghost. Many scholars and critics have argued that Hamlet's anger towards Gertrude is because of her weak, selfish, shallow and pleasure addicted character. Some label her personality as too weak to resist Claudius' seduction and too flimsy to care for her family and kingdom. Moreover, many scholars postulate that Hamlet has taken Gertrude to be a cheater and disloyal to her husband. Above these there are other interpretations that magnify or undermine her as a complex woman. She is made responsible for all the actions and happenings in the play- either good or bad. All these perspectives provide that Gertrude may have the potential of having an agenda in the play. She does not show any weakness or fickle mindedness anywhere in the play even though she is labelled as immoral, frail, and licentious woman. Her marriage with her brother-in-law maybe taken as a potential agenda to protect herself, her son and her Kingdom. This paper argues in this line that Gertrude's decision to remarry is an agenda which is more of a political and women's sensuality to protect herself and her son rather than weakness and frailty.

Keywords: agenda, marriage, political, sensual, disloyal

In the recent centuries one of the most read and analysed play is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Much has changed in the approach and perspective of reading this play in the recent years. Critics and scholars based on different aspects of philosophies and ideologies have articulated various interpretations of the play. But one thing in the play has remained unchanged and relatively no new interpretation is given. It is the reading of the character of Gertrude, the Queen. Her character is most of the time analysed and established to be sensuous who cannot control her overwhelming carnal desire and marries her brother-in-law. This is the most common notion and unchangeable interpretation of the character of Gertrude for the last few centuries. This typical interpretation of the character of Gertrude by the current readers and audiences is based on misinterpretation and misjudgement. There is more to Gertrude than her carnal desire. A close reading of the play is needed to seek further in depth inference of Gertrude's psyche.

From the very opening of the play, Hamlet despises his uncle but he vents out his anger and hatred to his mother, Gertrude. Even before he encounters with the Ghost and comes to know about the murder of his father, he feels offended and agitated toward his mother for her illegal marriage to Claudius. On the other hand, Gertrude has simply thought that Hamlet's anger towards her is for her hasty marriage with Claudius. She feels that it is obvious and rational but she neither seems to be aware of Claudius' crime nor does she believe herself as traitor. Throughout the play, Gertrude has spoken very little and moreover her action is also minimal and overshadowed by others. All these reasons encompass to make the character of Gertrude small and minor without any agenda or motivation. But after observing and exploring the play minutely, it comes to notice that the character of Gertrude cannot be denied as minor or without agenda. Many critics have viewed and analysed her character to probe what kind of person she is and what role she takes in the play. One such study is done by A.C. Bradley in his "Shakespearean Tragedy". He views Gertrude as a weak and sensitive woman who cannot involve in the conspiracy of murder of the king and further observes that her weak character cannot care or protect either her son or the kingdom. Moreover her docile and feeble nature cannot

resist Claudius's indecent approach. So, Hamlet and the Ghost tries to help her rather than taking revenge upon her. Accordingly, Valerie Traub, a critic, in her work "Jewel, Statues and Corpses" views that Hamlet's resentment towards his mother is because of her uncontrolled sexuality. She asserts that Hamlet takes Gertrude as a cheater and disloyal to his father and this in turn instilled in his mind that all women are capable whore and all men likely to be cuckold. Closer home, scholars like Pragati Das in her seminal work, "Shakespeare's Representation of Women in his Tragedies" concludes that Gertrude cannot be potential murderer but a docile, frail and frivolous woman who is addicted to pleasure. Thus, there are several interpretation of the character of the Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet*. But most of the work concludes Gertrude as a morbid villain by interpreting her character in terms of infidelity and whore dichotomy. These have made her an interesting topic to explore and analyse whether her character is responsible for all the actions and outcomes in the play.

Gertrude who is branded as sensual and disloyal woman has never shown her indecent desire or illicit affair in any part of the play. So, her marriage and her every action in the play can be observed from a different perspective. Gertrude is capable of having an agenda for all her actions apart from the common interpretation of her character as lustful, frailty, frivolous, and infidelity. Gertrude is an independent character who has the ability to make her own choice, judgement and action despite the beliefs of many critics and scholars. It is not that she marries Claudius to satisfy her libido but maybe because of the fact that she has an agenda to protect herself, her son and the kingdom of Denmark. Despite her minimal speech and actions it articulates towards this theory which needs to be observed and analysed critically. Janet Adelman has views in her *Suffocating Mothers* that even if Gertrude seems to watch merely all the events occurring around her, she is in fact the subject of the talk of the surrounding figures and characters. These talks either magnify or undermine the interpretation of her character. Further all the attention, talk and thoughts of Hamlet is only of his mother Gertrude. So this critic concludes that this might be the result of a number of critical evaluations done on mother-son relationship in

Hamlet. In this way most of the study labels Gertrude as sensuous woman, deprived of decency, piousness and moral ethics even if no one has mentioned about her hand in murdering her husband. Moreover she is treated as a cause for all the problems and issues in the family and in the kingdom. This tag in her character is accepted almost all the time by every readers, critics and audiences without any inquiry or question. Throughout the whole play, there is not a single evidence of her sexual initiative or infidelity or cheating. Another scholar Lisa Jardine opines in her works that Gertrude is blame for her incestuous nuptial bond with her brother-in-law, Claudius and marked her as the main instigator of this unholy alliance. She puts that it is all because the cultural norms and laws of the time do not permit or accept it. So looking from that angle Lisa has explained that the character of Gertrude has no fault but the problem is the perspective of the people and how they interpret through cultural and social dictums of the time. Again most readers and critics agree that Gertrude is at fault but the perspective of looking at the woman has changed in the modern day. When analysing the character of Gertrude, it is often considered that she is guilty for not mourning the death of her husband properly and hasty marries with her brother-in-law. This view that Gertrude is guilty is made by the words of Hamlet and the Ghost. These two characters create in the mind of the readers that Gertrude is amorous, immoral and disloyal. In this regard, Richard Levin has termed these two characters as ‘unreliable narrators’. Because of their pathetic feelings towards Gertrude they portray her in an adverse way.

In tune with the above perspective, it can be noted that how the words of the Ghost has moulded an image of the character of Gertrude to all the readers and audiences. When the Ghost is encountered by the guards and Horatio, it doesn't utter a single word. But when it meets Hamlet it speaks out his agenda. His agenda seems to be that he wants to take revenge upon Claudius through Hamlet. Even if the Ghost mentions the words ‘murder most foul’, his focus is more on the marriage of Gertrude than the act of his murder. After a thorough analysis it can be said that the Ghost asks Hamlet for revenge upon her illicit marriage rather than his murder. It is observant in the act when

Hamlet encounters the Ghost. The Ghost says to Hamlet:

With witchcrafts of his wits, with traitorous gifts-
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce!- won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.

This speech of the Ghost to Hamlet reveals that what hurts and offends him most is not his murder but the marriage of his Queen to Claudius. If the ghost really wants Hamlet to take revenge upon Claudius for his murder, he will not give much emphasis on the marriage. So, for the Ghost, the loss of his beloved Queen is far more concerning than the loss of his throne. Further the ghost says that even if it is Claudius who initially provoked his Queen to adultery, it is Gertrude who opens the door and gives favourable ground to him:

Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage. (1.5.49-64)

This speech of the Ghost makes Gertrude to degrade herself to a whore or lustful woman. Moreover on the other hand it elevates his character as pious and good. So, his voice has made the readers and audiences to despise Gertrude and put the blame for all troubles to her leaving aside the murderer Claudius. So, the idea of blame game shifts from Claudius, the murderer to Gertrude, the immoral lewd woman. The Ghost words to Hamlet when they meet in the night: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/ Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven/ And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge/ To prick and sting her" (1.5.92-95). It shows the Ghost concerns for Gertrude. He instructs Hamlet not to lay his hands on her or punish her and let nature take its course. But he asks Hamlet to take revenge upon Claudius for his evil deeds. So, the Ghost's words and concern for Gertrude has heightened the compassion and empathy towards him while it diminishes the virtue of Gertrude resulting into hatred.

Again when it is analysed with deep probe from Hamlet's side, he ignores the ghost appeal. Hamlet all the time focuses on his mother's

action rather than taking revenge upon the foul murder of his father. After the dumb show, even when he gets a fair chance to avenge the murder of his father by killing Claudius, he does not do so. He defends himself saying that if he killed him while he is praying, he will get salvation. This reasoning at the very moment creates a question of doubt. If he really wishes to avenge the murder, there will be no rational thinking of judging a proper or improper time for the deed. He will do it immediately. But when it comes to the closet scene it highlights a different perspective. Many critics and scholars interpret that scene as Hamlet's strategy to ascertain his mother's character. But the more likely interpretation is that Hamlet takes the circumstances to vent out his grudge against Gertrude.

If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
And reason panders will.

From this speech of Hamlet, it is also certain that his anger towards Gertrude is neither because she conspires with Claudius to murder his father nor for the murder. His grievance is that she is lustful and her libido does not suit her age and so her marriage with Claudius. Even though Hamlet tends to take revenge by killing Claudius, it is not because he is a murderer but he has illegally married his mother and possessed her. So when he has a suspicious feeling that someone is behind the curtain in his mother's closet, he is very much certain that it must be none other than the king, Claudius. Because it is the Queen's chamber and no one would likely to enter apart from him. So with this perception and without hesitation, he plunges his sword through the curtain by saying 'a mouse'. His intuitive involuntary action is because of his anger for his mother's illicit wedlock rather than the murder of his father. So all these blame game by the Ghost and Hamlet creates a disloyal, amorous and sexually explicit image of Gertrude in the mind of the readers and audiences. But a thorough analysis is needed from Gertrude's perspective

about her actions to project a clear, vivid picture and agenda of her character.

Her hasty marriage with Claudius, who is her brother-in-law, could be counted as an intentional personal and political agenda. Fortinbras has planned to attack Denmark by assuming that the kingdom is in chaos and mournful state because of the unnatural death of King Hamlet, Fortinbras has taken it as the perfect moment to attack and conquer Denmark. In Act I, Scene 2 of the play *Hamlet*, Claudius announces that

Now follows that you know: young Fortinbras,
Holding a weak supposal of our worth
Or thinking by our late dear brother's death
Our state to be disjoint and out of frame.

To make sure that the kingdom of Denmark is still intact and strong with good governance in the eye and mind of the Norwegian Prince, a royal wedding of the Queen and her former brother-in-law, Claudius is announced officially. Thus a new pack of formidable King and Queen is installed to show that the death of the former Dane does not batter the Kingdom. Again looking from the personal side, the closest male to whom Gertrude can rely with all her life is obviously her husband, the late king and her son Hamlet. Here it may be noted that in life what actually a woman expects from her man is the safe custodian. The man should be both strong emotionally and physically. As for the late King Hamlet, he is not that manly as a woman expected. He cares and loves his Queen Gertrude very much but maybe not in a manly way as she expected. Even after his death, the Ghost asks Hamlet not to take any action upon her. This is a clear sign that the late King's love for his queen is not in a manly term but a bit feminine, docile and sober way. This quality of the late King may have given a bad taste to the Queen. Coming to Hamlet again, her closest male after her husband to whom she should place all her beliefs, future and fate fails her expectation. Even when his father is murdered, he does not react as a man should do. Moreover the Queen, his mother knows that he is effeminate and tender. All these factors make the Queen to have an agenda- a personal

and political one. Since Gertrude is unaware that Claudius has murdered her husband the king by poisoning, she might have thought that Claudius is the most able man to rule her kingdom at that dreadful time. Thus to safeguard from the threat of the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras and to fulfil the personal need of a real man for protection, Gertrude chooses Claudius. Above this, she believes that deeply affected by the death of his father Hamlet might not be able to face Fortinbras in the eventuality of war. Therefore, marrying Claudius is the best option for her to protect the kingdom and give Hamlet a chance to be king afterwards. In this way Claudius who can also be a threat to Hamlet for the crown is controlled. To protect her status as a queen and a mother who is to take care for her son's future, it required a stable and good relationship between his son Hamlet and brother-in-law Claudius. Thus she takes a firm stand to remarry her brother-in-law to achieve her goals. But Hamlet fails to understand her agenda so he has resentment against her. And without calculating these probable eventualities, everyone has a preconceive motive of Gertrude's character. So analysing from this perspective we may put that Gertrude's motive of marrying with Claudius and ascending him to the throne of Denmark has a conscious personal and political agenda.

Although Gertrude has minimal speech and often overshadowed by the male characters, she is the pivotal character of the play *Hamlet*. The whole play progresses through her narration and persuasion. She is the centre of all the talks, intrigues and blames. But she is an independent woman, who steers her own destiny and command her actions. Although she is often interpreted in a negative version by the words of the male characters in the play, Gertrude is a woman of her own principle with marvellous capacity to act and achieve her ends. So instead of framing Gertrude as an immoral, downfallen and sexually promiscuous woman who marries her late husband's brother, she should be treated and portrayed as a potentially independent woman who has an agenda for her own life and her son's future.

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Life, Work of Badal Sircar (1925–2011): A Centenary Survey

Tapu Biswas

Town planner turned actor. Actor turned director and director turned dramatist. The man who breathed new life into theatre by taking it away from the confines of an auditorium and presenting it in the open under the sky, - he is Badal Sircar.

- The Telegraph, Calcutta, 20.03.1995

Abstract

Badal Sircar. Thespian, dramaturge, and playwright extraordinary was born in a middle class Bengali Christian family on 15 July, 1925 in Kolkata. His formal name was Sudhindra Sircar and ‘Badal’ was his family pet name used within the circles of his family. 2025 happens to mark the birth centenary of Badal Sircar. This year has witnessed a proliferation of writings and performances on this great theatre guru. However, there is still a lack of general information about life, works and accomplishments of this man who has been aptly described as the founder of modern Indian Theatre. This paper is an attempt to fill that lack of information. The legacy of Badal Sircar was not forgotten after his death. Today he forms the subject of scopes of research publication including full PhD thesis. Theatre lovers and stage practitioners remember him and continue to be inspired by his example. One hundred years after his birth, the dramatic world continues to remember and respect him.

Keywords: Third Theatre, Open Theatre, Proscenium Theatre, Thespian, Theatre Director.

Badal Sircar was born on 15 July, 1925 in Kolkata. His formal name was Sudhindra Sircar and ‘Badal’ was his family pet name. There is a

story behind this naming, for according to the family history, he was born on a stormy “badal” day and had cried loudly as a baby. Hence, he was jestingly called ‘badal’ or ‘storm’ by an uncle. The name stuck, and it was to become a fitting one for one who was to grow into being a stormy petrel and a radical agent of change in his chosen sphere in the theatre. Badal Sircar’s father Mahendralal Sircar was by profession a professor of History at the well-known Scottish Church College in Kolkata, and later became the first Indian principal of this college run by British missionaries. It was in this college too that after the completion of his school education, the young Badal was at first enrolled. However, he later took admission in the Bengal Engineering College and in the year 1947 passed the Bachelor of Engineering Examination in Civil Engineering. After qualifying as a Civil Engineer in July 1947, Sircar took up his first job near Nagpur in a construction company. He worked there for about four months but was very unhappy as he missed Calcutta, his friends, and habitual activities. Hence, he soon left the job and returned to Calcutta to join as an ill-paid Lecturer in Engineering in the College of Engineering run by the National Council of Education, Bengal which was later to become Jadavpur University. The one good thing about his work as a college professor was that it allowed him sufficient time in the evenings, and so Sircar started to study in an evening Diploma Course in Town and Regional Planning from the University of Calcutta. After acquiring this diploma in 1952, he left teaching and joined Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) as an engineer in 1953. Here, he worked at the Maithan Dam project on the Barakar River, living in a small township located around 400 miles away from Kolkata. He continued to work in DVC till 1957 when he left for London to study and to work there. However, Sircar’s thirst for education does not seem to have waned, for as late as in 1992 he finally took a Master of Arts degree in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University.

Badal Sircar is on record as having said that his introduction to theatre started comparatively late in life. As a child brought up in a fairly orthodox family, he had almost no opportunity of visiting the theatre, since it was felt in his family that it was not quite proper for a child to go to playhouses. Of course, he occasionally did go to the cinema with

his family and watched both English and Bengali films like *East of Borneo* and *Maa*, the latter starring the then popular Bengali actress, Anurupa Devi. Yet, even though an early exposure to theatre was lacking in his formative years, Sircar as a child had the habit of reading plays. Later he was to observe that people usually bought plays not so much as to read than as to perform them on stage. Indeed, in a sense, Sircar's initiation to the world of the theatre began only after his graduation. It was during his days as a teacher that he was given a role in a production staged by the Lecturers' Association of the National Council of Education, Jadavpur. It was around this time too that Sircar started an amateur theatre group named ENCA (Entally Novice Arts and Cultural Association) in his flat in central Kolkata. This group put on two or three minor productions before fading away into oblivion.

The ENCA group continued as long as Sircar lived in Kolkata, but it was during his two years at the Damodar Valley Corporation that Sircar's involvement with theatre may be said to have really begun. By Sircar's own admission, he and many of his fellow Assistant Engineers did not have much to do in the evenings in the isolated colony they lived in. Since time was hanging heavy on their hands, Sircar had the idea of starting a 'rehearsal' group or a play reading club in which people would come together to rehearse theatrical productions. The idea was that no play would actually be produced or staged, but all the actors and actresses would learn their parts and rehearse them together. There was no director and everybody would join in to suggest styles of performance. However, after four or five plays had been fully rehearsed by the group, it was inevitable that a demand came that one of them would have to be staged. This idea about performing a play came from the wife of a fellow engineer who was a member of the rehearsal club, and the first production in which Sircar and his colleagues were involved was Saradindu Bandopadhyay's *Detective*.

Proscenium Theatre Form:

The success of this venture led Sircar and his friends to stage three or four more plays, and these theatrical ventures may be said to have laid the foundation of Badal Sircar's life in drama. One among his

productions was his own dramatised version of a Bengali story, *Birinchibaba*, written by Saradindu Bandopadhyay. However, this was not the first of Sircar's adaptations since he had earlier written a few other adaptations. For instance, when Sircar came back to Kolkata in 1956, he wrote what was to be his first play *Solution X*. This play was inspired by a Hollywood film called *Monkey Business* which Sircar had once seen. The production won him the first prize in a play competition. However, it is a fact that though a few films inspired Sircar, the inspiration usually extended to little more than being a hint for a storyline. It is also a fact that none of Sircar's first plays were initially staged, since casting was always an issue and the director-producer was often reduced to actually begging people to perform. But a new direction was awaiting Badal Sircar in his life as a theatre person. Having had only a limited experience of watching the stalwarts of Bengali theatre in his time in Kolkata, the sole exception being Sisir Bhaduri in the play *Michael Madhusudan*, Sircar was to get the opportunity of watching the performance of such stars of British theatre as Vivien Leigh. This was when Sircar went to London, where he worked as an engineer during the day and attended evening classes towards a Diploma Course in Town Planning.

In London, after getting his Diploma, Sircar landed a job in the County Council of Surrey. He used to commute to his place of work in Surrey from his London accommodation by train, changing every evening at Waterloo station which was near the London film society. This meant that Sircar not only had the opportunity of watching many films before coming back home to West London, but also that he got the opportunity to expose himself to the London theatre milieu during this time. He used to largely frequent the theatres situated in working class locations where the audience consisted of dockyard workers and other similar proletarian groups of people. Among the actors whose works he witnessed were, (apart from Vivien Leigh who has been already mentioned) Michael Redgrave and Laurence Olivier. What impressed Sircar in particular was the non-declamatory style of acting adopted by the British actors. He was influenced in particular by two productions staged by a group called Theatre Workshop, the plays being

A Taste of Honey and *Air Hostess*. It was in London too that Sircar wrote his first fully original play, *Baro Pisima* [Elder Paternal Aunt].

In London, Sircar found it difficult to find even a single Bengali knowing auditor or reader for his play *Baro Pisima*. Indeed, he had to wait till he came back to Kolkata in 1959 before he could find a group of listeners before whom he could actually read the play. This group was a motley band of theatre enthusiasts who had started an informal cultural association they called 'Chakra'. It was this group which performed Sircar's early plays like *Solution X* (1956), *Sanibar* [Saturday] (1959), *Ram Shyam Jadu* (1961), *Thana Theke Aschhi* [Coming from Police Station] (based on J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*), and *Samabritta* [Encirclement] (1961), the last two plays being his crime dramas. The Chakra years- from around 1960 to 1963- were also significant since it is during this period of time that Badal Sircar wrote *Evam Indrajit*. In fact the play was not intended initially to be performed at all, for Sircar had written it as an entirely private piece. Even the first publication of the text in the theatre group Bohurupee's theater journal in 1965 was not planned by Sircar who had been happy to only have his friends read the play in a manuscript format.

Next, in 1963, Badal Sircar left for France for nine months on a French government scholarship in Town Planning. He had been working in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation before this, but he gave up this job, leaving behind his wife and two daughters at home in Kolkata. While living in France, he wrote no less than four plays, these being *Ballavpurer Roopkatha* [The Fairy Tale of Ballavpur] (1963), *Saara Raat* [The Whole Night] (1963), *Vichitranusthan* [Variegated Programmes] (1963) and *Kobi Kahini* [The Story of a poet] (1964). Sircar came back to Kolkata for a few months in March 1964 but left India once again in July the same year to work in Nigeria as a Town Planner. The Nigerian years were quite fruitful for Badal Sircar, with at least two plays- *Baki Itihas* [The Remaining History] and *Bagh* [Tiger] being completed. *Bagh* came to be completely written out in a burst of creativity in fifteen hours flat. Back in Kolkata for a vacation, Badal Sircar discovered that he had become well-known, if not famous, in Kolkata's theatre circles. Sambhu Mitra showed interest in staging some of Sircar's

plays like *Baki Itihas*, *Vichitranusthan* and *Ram Shyam Jadu*. Sircar also watched the Souvanik theatre group's production of *Evam Indrajit* (first staged on 16 September 1965) during this time, though he was far from being satisfied with the performance. Back in Nigeria after his vacation, his belief in his own creative power restored and reinforced, Badal Sircar wrote several other plays including *Pore Kono Din* [Some Day Later] (1966, an imaginative play based on a science fiction story that he had once read), *Jodi Ar Ek Baar* [If only Once More] (a text inspired by a play by James Barry), *Tringsha Satabdi* [Thirteenth Century] (1966, a kind of a documentary drama on the nuclear holocaust), *Pagla Ghoda* [The Wild Horse] (1967), and a dramatization of Samareesh Basu's novel *Bibor* [The Cave]. Then, having finally returned from Nigeria in 1967, Sircar first joined Bohurupee before leaving the group soon after due to temperamental differences. Around this time, he began to feel the necessity of starting his own theatre group, and the outcome was the formation of the theatre group 'Satabdi' in 1967. This group was formed with a nucleus of some people whom Sircar knew well, and it was financed by some of the money that Sircar had saved from his earnings in Nigeria. While not a fully professional company, the group began to run on a profit-sharing basis with box office takings exceeding a certain amount being distributed amongst the members of the group. This idea may have been good, but it did not take long for Satabdi to disintegrate. This was partly because of differences of opinion and attitudes among those who were involved in it, and partly because a few shows did not prove to be profitable. The first production under the Satabdi banner was *Kobi Kahini* on 24 January 1968, and the group hired the auditorium in Kolkata's Rabindra Sarobar Stadium for sixteen consecutive Sundays. Two shows were held on each Sunday, the first at 3 p.m. and the second at 6.30 p.m. The 3 p.m. performances were thinly attended, and the productions were withdrawn after twelve Sundays. Of these twelve days, *Kobi Kahini* was performed on eight days, that is for a total of sixteen shows. A double bill of *Bagh* and *Vichitranusthan* were staged on the remaining four Sundays. Rehearsals were begun for a production of *Tringsha Satabdi*, but these could not be continued.

As the drawbacks of the profit-sharing concept began to manifest

themselves, Badal Sircar disassociated himself from the stage and by 1968 the Satabdi group passed into non-existence. The Satabdi endeavor did however prove how popular the acting profession was in contemporary Bengal. Sircar had inserted a brief classified advertisement in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, a Bengali newspaper, inviting applications from those who were willing to join the group. There turned out to be over 900 replies to the single advertisement which Sircar published.

Even after the decline of Satabdi a few former members of the group refused Badal Sircar to part with the company. He encouraged many of them to join other theatre groups like Bohurupee, but a few die-hards still remained with him when he started a play-reading and theatre discussion circle, meetings of which were held once every week. It was at this time that Sircar's interest in the idea of 'Theatre in the Round' began to get more pronounced. The beginnings of this interest went back to Sircar's London days (1957) when he had first witnessed a Theatre in the Round production. This production of an English translation of Racine's *Phaedra* was staged in a big room on the top floor of the hostel in which Sircar lived as a lodger. Later, he came to know about the Theatre in the Round auditorium in Paris which featured not only a fixed gallery-type of seating, but also the use of sets and over fifty spotlights for illumination. During his Satabdi days and before that, Sircar had staged his productions only in a proscenium format, but all along the idea of Theatre in the Round had remained at the back of his mind. This probably was to play an important role in his conceptualization of the 'Third Theatre'.

In 1968, Badal Sircar wrote *Circus*, which was first performed by Satabdi in 1969. Around this time in 1969, Sircar was granted a Cultural Exchange Fellowship for two months by the Government of India. Taking this opportunity, he went on to visit USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia. Before he left, he told his associates that if they learnt their roles during the two months he would be away, he would think about producing the play *Prolap* [Delirium]. About Sircar's experience in these East European nations, the scholar Kirti Jain has written:

He [Sircar] got the opportunity to see some of the most exciting

and most innovative theatre in the world- Yuri Lyubimov's productions of *The Good Person of Setjuhan*, *Galileo* and a rehearsal of Gorki's *The Mother* at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow; Jari's pantomime and Cinoherni Klub Theatre's productions in Prague, and most important of all theatre events, Grotowski's *Apocalypse Cum Figuris* in Poland.¹

When Sircar returned, he discovered that everyone in his group was ready with their parts. He himself quickly learnt his own lines and the Satabdi group was reborn in its second incarnation with the staging of *Pralap*. This was in 1969 when the first two productions of this play were offered in Rabindra Sadan, Kolkata, with later shows being held in the much smaller Pratap Memorial Hall in north Kolkata. The Satabdi group followed this by the staging of a few other plays like *Sara Rattir*, but none had more than six or seven performances. However, with the reincarnation of Satabdi, Badal Sircar hit upon a new resolve. This was to de-commercialize his productions, allowing them to either make money or run at a loss without the obligation of paying money to anybody in the group. Part of the new resolve was that the production cost would be kept at a maximum of Rs. 100 only, and that this budget would include expenses for not only the sets, but also for costumes and props.

The use of imagination was the key to this project. A platform made for use in one production was re-used for the next. A striking example of the optimization of resources that was effected was the production of *Ballavpurer Roopkatha* which was staged at a total cost of Rs. 65 only. This amount included expenses not only for an ornate and traditional throne, but also the cost of on-stage pillars. These 'pillars' were actually strips of cloth that surrounded the three sides of a square and cubical block of wood. This idea came from the renowned artist Debabrata Mukherjee who was a friend of Sircar. The sides of the cloth pillars were coloured ivory-grey and a marble-mosaic effect was created on them by having spots painted on them with fabric paint. This work was done by an art college student who was a member of the group. The cloth at the top of the 'pillar' was tied in a knot and the wooden block was weighted down with a heavy weight to keep the cloth sides straight.

From a distance, the illusion created was that of a solid standing column, tapering at its top. Also, what was most convenient about these pillars was that they were very portable. Taken down, the cloth could be folded on top of the wooden block and the whole carried away easily. Other low-cost innovations in the construction of the set involved covering the platform with marble paper, the use of masonite cut-outs, and a backdrop effect of crumbling plaster on the walls showing exposed brick work being created by drawing and coloring sheets of chart paper which were then pinned to or sewn on the black backdrop. The basic idea was not to create a realistic setting, but only to suggest one. The on-stage furniture was sourced from home and even the upholstery of the throne which looked like velvet was actually made out of cheap cloth.

A decision had earlier been taken by the whole Satabdi group that if the first show of *Ballavpurer Roopkatha* did not recover its costs, it would be the final play to be staged by the group. The Rabindra Sarobar auditorium in which it was to be staged was a big 700 seat hall. The stakes were thus high and the members of Satabdi, Badal Sircar included, began a push-sale campaign to sell tickets to the show. The final result was however highly satisfactory, for it was a house full production, with people having to be actually turned away for lack of vacant seats. This was the second of Badal Sircar's commercial successes, for the staging of *Prolap* had also seen a house-full, though Pratap Memorial Hall was only a 300 seat auditorium.

The staging of *Ballavpurer Roopkatha* was followed by the staging of *Sagina Mahato* and *Abu Hossain*, all three stagings making enough money to cover all production expenses, including payments for lights and auditorium hiring charges. However, the idea of 'Theatre in the Round' had already entered Sircar's mind by this time. The first of Badal Sircar's productions in this form was *Sagina Mahato* which had already been produced in a proscenium format. The first In-the-Round production was tried out in the ABTA (All Bengal Teachers' Association) hall located in central Kolkata, but Sircar discovered that this was not at all an ideal venue, partly because the floor of the hall was flat, which meant that the spectators in the back rows had trouble seeing the action,

and partly because the traditional hanging spotlights did not work out well. The quest for a new performing space thus began, when, just at this time, Sircar was awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 1972. With some of his Fellowship money, and with some of his own funds, Sircar left for a tour of Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and America. He immersed himself in theatre in all these countries, seeing plays, watching rehearsals, attending preparatory meetings and taking part in workshops. The tour proved to be an extremely rich learning experience for Sircar. He was most impressed with 'Poor Theatre' in particular, learning to appreciate how the most significant theatrical effects could be created with the least inputs, and how innovative lighting could be done using ordinary hall lights.

Back in India, Sircar took the decision to disband Satabdi once again, and to take up Theatre-in-the-Round in all seriousness. A second floor room was rented in the Academy of Fine Arts building for a period of two years, and a membership system was introduced for theatre-lovers. Members had to pay an initial admission fee of four rupees, and a yearly subscription of two rupees. In exchange, they would be given free tickets for a maximum of five shows, and they could watch subsequent shows at a special concessional rate of one rupee per ticket. It was guaranteed that there would be a minimum of one show per week, and that at least three new productions would be staged in the course of a year.

In the long run however, this proved to be a commitment difficult to maintain, for with the dissolution of Satabdi, new productions also ceased. As a stop-gap arrangement, Sircar involved another director, Shyamal Ghosh of the Nakshatra group in his project, allowing him to stage his production of *Nayan Kabirer Pala* [The Play of Nayan Kabir, pala is a narrative musical song in Bengal] for a period of around two months. On his own, Sircar moved towards the concept of *Mukta Mela* or Improvised Theatre in an open space with his own committed group of 25 or 26 enthusiasts, many of whom were young people. The advantage of this form of theatre activity was that it was more important to hold discussion sessions than formal rehearsals.

With his *Mukta Mela* productions, Sircar and his group tided over the crisis of having to offer at least three different play performances every year. After this, the play *Michhil* was produced, and this was followed by preparations for *Tringsho Satabd* [Thirteenth Century]. The first scene of this earlier written play was omitted in its entirety and the play's former realistic tone was discarded in favor of an entirely new form. This was the result of a sense of a new responsibility on the part of Sircar.

Around this time Sircar's two-year term of contract with the Academy of Fine Arts was coming to an end. The monthly rent for the room at this venue had been Rs. 250, but when the time came for a renewal of the rent, the amount payable was increased to Rs. 450. Sircar refused to pay any more than Rs. 250, partly because the possibilities of the Open Theatre format had seized his imagination. Sircar's first Open Theatre production had been *Sagina Mahato* staged in the space in the Academy of Fine Arts. As noted earlier, this play had been originally written and performed in proscenium style, but now it was adapted for Open Theatre. The first play that Sircar wrote exclusively for the Open Theatre was *Spartacus*, which too was staged at the Academy of Fine Arts. After this came the production of *Evam Indrajit* which was staged in proscenium style in Manipur. Next, Sircar wrote his *Abu Hossain* for Open Theatre.

Open Theatre performances outside the Academy of Fine Arts were initiated by Badal Sircar in Kolkata's Curzon Park, where *Spartacus* was first enacted. The Curzon Park space later came to be replaced by the open grounds opposite the Academy of Fine Arts, partly because other city theatre groups had begun to perform their productions at Curzon Park. The play *Bhoma* was premiered in the field across the Academy, and another play that was put on in the same space was *Sesh Ne* [There Is No End]. Open Theatre performances however had their own share of difficulties, especially at the time of the Emergency in India. Shows at Curzon Park and elsewhere were disallowed by the Police, and in one case involving another theatre group of Kolkata, a theatre person named Probir Dutta was killed allegedly by police bullets. Sircar's own group was warned against performing in the open air on several occasions,

and once they were lathi charged and forcibly dispersed. Under the circumstances, a few performances were put on under circumstances of secrecy, with only known and trusted people being informed about the shows.

In early 1976, Sircar rented Pragyandanda Hall, an auditorium in Moulali, near Sealdah Station in central Kolkata for six Sundays. Then, as the authorities of the hall did not allow any further shows to be held there, Sircar moved his productions to the auditorium of the Theosophical Society from 1977 to 1980. The performances at this venue proved to be extremely successful, with one play *Gondi* [The Boudary] a Brechtian reworking, (1977), which premiered here, becoming so popular that the tickets to two shows were sold out in advance. The price of admission was one rupee only, payable as a donation. The idea was that those who could afford to pay more would leave a bigger donation, while those who could not afford to contribute even a rupee could watch the show for free. Plays enacted at the Theosophical Society hall were *Michhil*, *Tringsho Satabdi*, *Bhoma*, *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas* (1976), *Captain Hooray* (1977), *Monikanchan* (1977), *Hattamalar Oparey* (1977), *Gondi*, *Bashi Khobor* (1978). These plays were produced over a period of 3 years and 10 months, after which Sircar had to move to a new theatre hall - the auditorium of the Sindhi Youth Association. In between, there was a fallow period of five months during which Sircar had no theatrical space to work in.

Performances at the Sindhi Youth Association hall proved to be less commercially viable than those at the Theosophical Society auditorium. Expenses were going up, and there always remained a gap between a house full earning of Rs. 80 to Rs. 85, and a production cost of around Rs. 110. In the meantime a few years earlier, Sircar had already begun to take his theatre to the countryside. This had started in 1974 when he had produced his *Bhoma* in Rangabelia village. This had been facilitated in part by Badal Sircar's joining the Comprehensive Area Development Corporation, a governmental statutory body, as Director of Planning.

Around this time, too, Sircar moved towards experimenting with innovations in theatrical writing and the employment of dramatic form.

The process may be said to have been inaugurated by Sircar's attempt at a dramatic adaptation of Manik Bandopadhyay's Bengali novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* in 1978. Though initially Sircar was reluctant to turn this work of fiction into a play, he soon came to realize that the process of dramatization would entail reducing everything in the novel into a dialogue format. This would mean cutting out all the lines in the novel which were descriptive and evocative of a sense of beauty. Yet, Sircar was emboldened to make an attempt especially since he was buoyed up by the success of his adaptation of Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as *Gondi*. In *Gondi*, the songs of Brecht had been transformed by Sircar into lines of poetry spoken out by a group of actors who also served as a kind of chorus. Yet, the chorus had not been left outside the performance, for the actors in the chorus also served as active performers on stage. For instance, one actor would act and then turn into a choric voice and utter the poetic lines, and even join in with other actors to create a human set of a door or a river on stage.

Using the novel, Sircar wrote out a draft summary of the novel *Padma Nadir Majhi*, incorporating both descriptive lines taken from the text and dialogues. The dialogues in this draft were however left unascribed to any particular character. Each piece of dialogue was preceded by a colon, with the identity of the speaker left unacknowledged and unattributed. Even the descriptive lines taken from the novel were given the same treatment. This way, Sircar tried not to 'dramatize' the novel but to transcreate it theatrically. Work was continued on this experiment for some time, but it was never completed. Then, in 1979, Sircar wrote *Memorandum*, which is yet to be published. He adapted Edward Bond's text *We Come to the River* as *Nadite* (1980, revised in 1992). This play was performed at Asian College of Journalism in 2002. *Nadite* delineates the agony of common people bearing the burden of destructive war under autocracy and despotism.

His experimentation in the creation of a new theatrical idiom was followed by Badal Sircar's taking up of *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* [Tales of the Serpent Girl] (1981). The methods that had been evolved in the theatricalization of *Padma Nadir Majhi* [Boatman of the Padma River] came to be applied to this play text also, and the initial script that was

produced was revised and finalized. The Satabdi group was no longer fully active at this time, but the production was mounted with the assistance of two more theatre groups, Ritam and Pathasena. Sircar however had mixed feelings about the work. He felt that like *Padma Nadir Majhi*, *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* was a kind of sample of open theatre that was ideally suited for the enjoyment of only a small group of spectators. Sircar in fact felt that it was a play that was almost totally atmospheric in its dramatic function. It was because of this that the spectators were almost completely encircled by the enactment. The acting was done before the audience, on its sides, and even behind it. Both the audience and the actors thus became participants in the action, almost as partners. Sometimes words were spoken from within the acting arena, sometimes from outside this space, occasionally from the passage behind the audience, or even from the spaces on either side of the spectators. This way, spoken words and even musical tunes served as a backdrop to the action. However, it was evident that such a mode of production would be possible only before small audiences comprising no more than 80 to 90 people. Any more, and the norms of the production could no longer be maintained. Performances in villages for example where there would be more than 200 to 250 people watching the performance, could not be conveniently held. Yet, *Sagina Mahato* was performed in this way in an open field in a village, and also even in Santiniketan's *Natya Ghar* (Theatre Room) in the presence of nearly 3000 people in 1994.

An earlier experiment by Badal Sircar resulted in *Bhanga Manush*, a production crafted out of a workshop process. The play was produced at the Theosophical Society hall. Another play, *Manushe-Manushe* (1981) was a structured version of *Bhanga Manush*, but non-verbal in a sense since the words or language used here were not employed in the sense of speech or dialogue. There was instead a succession of statements, all unrelated to each other. For instance, there was a newspaper headline read out together with a line from a speech, or there would be a line from a political discourse with the familiar statutory warning that smoking is injurious to health. Often single words or phrases like 'Do yaa Teen, Baas', 'Forward March' or 'Goal' were spoken out. The chorus

responded with a 'No' to each interjection, till the very end of the play when the chorus said 'Yes' to the words: '*Manushe –Manushe Bhalobasa*' ('Love between human beings'). There was a tea-party scene in which on one side a hungry man begged for food, and on the other rich people exchanged inanities. The idea was that no particular language was at all needed to be understood, and that the meaning of the Bengali word 'Bhalobasa' (love) was all that needed to be known. Language was thus reduced to the status of something less important, and the tone of the utterance was given priority, over content or even meaning.

The following year in 1982, Badal Sircar wrote *Dwairatha* [Combat between Two Charioteers] but it was staged in 2007 after nearly twenty-five years of its writing. He also wrote *Udyogparva* [Prepartory Period] in the same year. Another radical experiment in theatrecraft was carried out by Badal Sircar in his writing of *Khatmat Kring*. The genesis of this play was an idea about the employment of humor in the treatment of serious, grim themes and issues. Before writing this play, Sircar had researched the concepts of humor, of black comedy, Nonsense and the Absurd. Upon having discussed his understanding of these topics with the members of Satabdi, Sircar returned home one evening and wrote out a scene. The scene was read out in the group, and following further discussion on this, another scene was scripted. Sometimes scenes that had been written on earlier occasions but had been left incomplete were incorporated into the gradually emerging play-text. All this while, the already composed scenes were being read and discussed in workshop sessions and rehearsals. Sometimes the order of the scenes was reversed, a later one taking the place of an earlier one and so on. Often some scenes were left out, while others were expanded and strengthened with the addition of new lines. Sometimes, missing links between the different scenes were supplied. In this way the play script evolved and was gradually completed.

Initially, Sircar and his group were apprehensive about the audience reaction to the play. They felt that the spectators may not react in expected ways since the play sought to create humor and to make funny such unfunny scenarios as ways to maximize deaths in concentration camps, the most efficient way to dispose of dead bodies,

the recycling of dead bodies to produce organic fertilizer, etc. But this was not all, for the purpose of the drama was not to make the audience laugh. Rather it was the intention of the playwright and the actors to create an impact on the minds of the spectators. It was feared that the audience might be left in two minds about whether or not to laugh out. It was felt that there was a danger that this perplexity may cause the audience to dislike the play.

Further, even beyond such apprehensions there lay also Sircar's own distinctive perception and understanding of absurdity. His logic was that the world and its prevalent socio-economic system was truly absurd, that human kind was capable of sending men to the moon but incapable or unwilling to solve the perennial problem of global hunger, that nuclear weapons had been developed that could destroy the world 400 times over, even without men having evolved any idea of how to stop such destructive tendencies. More, Sircar felt that it was also absurd that ordinary men and women had stopped thinking of the absurdity of their own situations, and that intelligence and willful blindness often went hand in hand. Sircar realized that if these contradictions, these absurdities, had to be embodied in and through a piece of dramatic writing, it was not possible to do so through the medium of a naturalistic play. This is why Sircar moved beyond naturalism as a dramatist at this phase of his career.

Khatmat Kring (1983) however turned out to be an unexpected success. The initial shows were attended by spectators who had not come to expect traditional theatre from Sircar and Satabdi, but it turned out that even non-urban audience responded warmly to the play. Productions staged in smaller and comparatively less sophisticated towns like Krishnagar proved to be quite popular. Sircar was heartened to note that the audience were mature enough to keep in step with his own development as a dramatist and an innovator and creator of new theatrical forms and idioms.

Workshops:

Part of this development in Sircar's own distinctive style of drama came about as a result of his involvement in workshops. One of the

earliest workshops that was held by Sircar was in Manipur. Here, in August 1972 Sircar held an intensive 21 day workshop. The play that was shaped over these three weeks through what Sircar called a 'working process' was *Spartacus*. The production was staged in a wooden pillared roofed space without walls with a cast of 42 main actors and 14 other actors who played the role of slaves. The members of the audience who had been invited to the show sat down on mats laid on the floor under the roof, but many other non-invited spectators who had come to see the performance happened to stand along the sides to watch. Interestingly enough, the enactment of the scene of revolt elicited spontaneous applause from the ordinary people standing along the sides, even as the well-dressed invitees seated on the floor-mats displayed little or no emotion.

Subsequently, Badal Sircar held many more workshops in Bengal, not only with the member of his own group, Satabdi, but also with other theatre groups like Pathasena and Ritam. Sircar also conducted workshops outside Kolkata in places like Tripura, Allahabad, Kanpur, Pune, Delhi, Bhubaneswar, Kerala, Madras (now Chennai), etc. However not all of these workshops were held for theatre persons. For instance, Sircar held a workshop at the Film Institute in Pune in an acting course. Another workshop was held by Sircar for the students of the National Institute of Design who had opted for an Elective course on "Curricular Theatre." The point of these workshops was not to directly upgrade the acting skills of actors, but to bring out the latent humanity in each workshop participant. Sircar's motto was "First a Man, then a Theatre Man," and his intention was to make the actor aware of his or her own inner being, to make him or her conscious of the capabilities of his/her body, to teach the expression of feelings through the body.

Frequently in his workshops attended by theatre groups Sircar came to note that many participants had questions regarding the purpose and the efficacy of the process itself. Sircar allowed them to voice these questions, but did not feel it necessary to answer them immediately. Indeed, he felt that providing answers to the actors' questions would result in his indulging in long theatrical discussions and explanations. Hence, he never felt the need to address any question but allowed the participants to continue attending the workshop. After six or seven

days, when Sircar asked if anyone had any questions, the general response would be that all the answers had been found by the participants themselves. Workshop activities like Spot Games, Spontaneous Teamwork, Community Feeling, Co-operation over Competition etc. became singularly relevant to the participants who came to realize that they were human individuals above all. Occasionally, the workshop participants took all these activities as a wonderful experience by itself, not thinking of them as theatre-training procedures. But even this reaction was not in accordance with Sircar's intention which was the provocation of an impact, either theatrical or non-theatrical, in the psyche of the participant.

The non-theatrical, or perhaps meta-theatrical dimension of Badal Sircar's workshops became increasingly important to him over time. He began getting invitations from various social groups to conduct his workshops. Even developmental agencies working for the upliftment of slum dwellers and poor villagers and farmers called upon Sircar for training in motivating the social workers working with them. By attending these workshops, the workers were empowered to better communicate with the people they served. Many of them went on to help the poor folk to stage plays about their own circumstances, and even helped them to write their own plays about their own issues and to provide solutions to their problems. In Bangalore, Sircar held two workshops for a semi-political all-Karnataka group called 'Samudaya' which worked in the villages against such social inequities as feudalism, illiteracy and violence inflicted upon women. Two other similar workshops were held by Sircar in Bangalore for the benefit of social workers, and another was organized in Hyderabad. In Kolkata, the Institute of Social Work arranged for four eight-day workshops, one after the other. Oxfam in the state of Tamil Nadu also invited Sircar to conduct a similar type of workshop. Often, workshop participants came to Kolkata and other places to attend Sircar's workshops. Sometimes, women wishing to perform street theatre on topics like dowry-death came from cities as far away as Hyderabad to join in the workshops. Sircar himself felt that there was no conflict between his practice as a dramaturge, as a working playwright and director, and his special role as a conductor of workshops.

Indeed, a time came when he began to be recognized outside Bengal more as a social worker than as a mere theatre person.

Sircar had his own way of looking at himself as a conductor of workshops. He likened himself to a primary school teacher, as a kind of tutor of new minds. His role as a theatre director he compared to the function of a teacher at a higher level, like a Secondary School teacher or even a College or University Professor. Over the years, he began to find his role as the director of his theatre group becoming a more and more onerous responsibility. His function as a workshop conductor began to appear to him as a far more compelling and interesting task. This was because he no longer felt having any sense of real responsibility left after successfully conducting a workshop. Indeed, he left it to the workshop participants themselves to continue or not to continue with the bonding that had been achieved among themselves during the workshop process. Sircar felt himself uninvolved with the aftermath, even though he often received letters and communications from his erstwhile workshop participants. Sometimes, as with a group that had attended his workshop in Delhi, Sircar's planting of the seed flourished into a thriving plant. The Delhi group for instance went on to produce no less than three plays by themselves, and even translated *Bhoma* into English and published it.

Open Theatre Movement & Third Theatre Movement:

For a time, Sircar toyed with the idea of setting up a facility for the regular holding of workshops. This idea gradually crystallized in his mind after he successfully held a series of workshops not in the metropolitan centres but in rural environments and remote settings like Rangabalia village in the Sunderbans area in West Bengal, in a village in the Singhbhum district in Bihar, in a place near the border of the Purulia district in West Bengal, etc. Participants in these workshops were not educated city folk but local village farmers, landless peasants and tribal people. Such activities with the socially and economically weaker classes began to become increasingly relevant to Sircar. And while reluctant to describe his procedure as educative, Sircar began to realize that the institutionalization of workshops was a vision, an objective worthy to be

pursued. At one time he even thought of building up a basic infrastructure - a dormitory for participants, arrangements for food, and a workshop space on a plot of land that he had been offered for free by a friend. He even applied for a government grant to fulfill this objective, but he ultimately dropped the idea on the ground that this would necessitate taking on irksome financial and administrative responsibilities. Later, he collaborated in planning just such a facility in a rural setting with a non-governmental organization, the Institute of Social Welfare, going to the extent of planning and conceptualizing the holding of four to six workshops a year, with even an idea of the training of personnel to conduct further workshops.

Sircar also linked his perception of theatre as a means of education to his larger vision of a pan-Indian mass theatre. According to him, the Open Theatre movement had the potential of touching upon and transforming the lives of the poor, the illiterate and the marginalized populace of India. What he envisioned was the generation of a popular grass roots theatre by the members of the weaker sections of society themselves. This would be a theatre different from the traditional folk theatre which had traditionally involved itself with themes and issues derived from either mythological, or religious, or historical sources. As Sircar perceived it, there was nothing in either urban or even in the so-called folk theatre that concerned itself with the realities of a peasant's problems. Even when folk theatre came in contact with the city, the result was no more than an established folk form like the *Tamasha* or *Bhawai* coming to include one or two topical social and political references. Hence, the goal for the alternative theatre that Sircar visualized was one that would be produced within a particular community, by the members of that specific community, and be about the problems faced by that singular community. Sircar became convinced about the importance of this notion after his experience in Rangabalia village where he had conducted a series of two two-day workshops. After the workshops, the participating villagers had continued the workshops by themselves and fashioned two short half-hour long plays about their own issues. Even more encouraging was the reaction of the landless labourers in Gujarat for whom Sircar had undertaken a three-day

workshop. The twenty-two participants in this workshop had a good number of illiterate participants, together with a few who had read up to class 2 or 3 in school. The most educated in the group had had 9 or 10 years of schooling. Yet the members of this wholly subaltern group produced no less than twenty-two ten minutes plays about their own life conditions after only one day of their exposure to and participation in the workshop process. The success of such ventures gave Sircar the belief that his Third Theatre movement would continue to flourish in India even after him. And his confidence grew when he saw that one of his plays, *Michhil* (or *Juloos* in Hindi translation), had been extensively performed. Occasionally, the performances would be done under the open sky, the way in which Sircar wanted it to be performed, and the experience would encourage the actors to think beyond the proscenium format of theatre. Thus did the Open Theatre movement progress and develop further.

Sircar himself was modest about claims made on his behalf that he had either created or pioneered Open Theatre. He noted that several other groups had started similar innovations on their own without knowing anything about him. One theatre group he mentioned in particular was Delhi's 'Jana Natya Mancha' which regularly staged street theatre. Another group was Ahmedabad's 'Chingari' (Spark) which performed Street Theatre on dowry deaths, and a third was a Street Theatre group in Surat. Yet, what was of central importance to Badal Sircar was the content of such plays. Form for him always came second. Hence, he famously declared that while he would be open to performing Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*, he would never think of staging Girish Karnad's play *Tughlaq*, even as he acknowledged the formal brilliance of Tendulkar.

Sircar's commitment to his own idea of theatre also led him to deliver lectures on Open Theatre at various places. On Mondays, he attended Study Circle meetings organized by a less known Kolkata based group named 'Arena'. These meetings were attended by members of different groups like Satabdi, Pathasena, ATG, Ritam, etc. The first day around 15 or 16 people joined in the Study Circle discussions, but the next day Sircar found that no less than 23 or 24 people were

present. The format of these meetings was deliberately left open by Sircar who initiated a discussion on any one topic, allowed questions to be evolved and subsequently discussed and answered in further study sessions. Sircar basically regarded his workshops, his lectures and his contributions to Study Circle meetings as efforts contributing to his mission as a theatre person - not to personally advance theater from point A to point B, but to allow theatre to evolve from point A to point B.

Sircar also himself strongly denied that he was ever a consistent playwright or dramatist. Referring to himself as a 'Theatre Man', Sircar said that he had never consistently written plays. He wrote only as necessity demanded, sometimes never at all, and sometimes with a concerted effort from morning to late into the night, depending on the availability of time. He asserted that it was a misconception that he had started out by writing plays. He stressed instead that had started as an actor, then moved on to serve as director, and only then turned to writing plays particularly because he did not find plays suitable enough to produce. About the thirty odd plays he had written, Sircar said that these were often done spontaneously over brief periods of time. *Evam Indrajit* had been written over a span of seven continuous days. *Kavi Kahini* had been finished in five consecutive days. *Bagh* was written at a stretch of around fifteen hours only, or in less than a whole day. About his various essays and articles, Sircar however admitted that they had been written under demand. He had written them only when he had been asked to contribute a piece. But Sircar did admit that this compulsion to write had often proved to be a positive outcome, for the act of writing had forced him to first clarify his ideas in his own mind before setting them down on paper. Yet while writing to order was possible occasionally in so far as pieces like an essay on Dwijendra Lal Roy was concerned, it was impossible for Sircar to write a play on demand. He confessed that he had often sat down with pen and paper to write a play for his own group, but often failed in this effort.

About the influences cast upon him especially in his fashioning of a theatrical language of his own, Sircar acknowledged his indebtedness to a number of directors. What he had learnt from his exposure to British

and Russian theatre in particular was the idea of a certain standard. From watching the productions of Jon Littlewood and of the Taganka Theatre of Moscow, Sircar understood just how excellent acting could be, and just how outstanding good choreography could be. From Littlewood's creation of a prison through the deployment of human actors, and from the evocation of a gun on stage by the same means, Sircar understood how effective human sets could be. From Lubimov, Sircar learnt the idea of montage. From this director's production of *Ten Days That Shook the World* Sircar further came to appreciate how an entire book could be effectively dramatized. In his own practice, this led to Sircar's *Nagini Kanyar Kahini*. Also, from Littlewood's *What A Lovely War*, Sircar learnt how even a serious and poignant theme could be transformed into a hilarious comedy. This is precisely what Sircar himself did in *Khat Mat Kring*. Closer to home, among the Bengali productions he had seen, Sircar acknowledged that Nandikar's productions of *Tin Poishar Pala* and *Rakta Karabi* had influenced him.

About his moving away from the proscenium stage format from which he had started out, Sircar said that his move towards Open Theatre had been prompted by questions that had arisen in his mind about the relationship between actors and spectators, and about the ways in which theatre could reach out to an audience. The limitations of the proscenium stage with regard to these factors had emerged as vital issues to him. At that point of time, in the late 1960s the idea of an Open Theatre that would be flexible, easily movable and inexpensive, and easily performable in village and rural areas had not yet taken full shape in his mind. It was not as if he left the proscenium stage in the interest of communicating better with his audience, and only later included his philosophy, his political beliefs and new subject matters into the new format. It certainly did not happen in this way. As a student, Sircar had been concerned with the same issues that he was concerned with in his maturity. Like many other middle class individuals living in Kolkata during that time, Sircar as a young man had wanted to move away from or even to reject orthodoxies and staid middle-class socio-economic values. Hence when he came to embrace theatre, he took to it as a kind of alternative path. Of course in his initial days, he had not realized that

theatre could be a tool to bring about a transformation of society. Originally, he had only thought of doing good theatre, and this had been his sole objective. At that time he had only wanted to portray some truths and values through his plays. However he gradually came to realize that his inability to conceptualize theatre as an instrument to usher in social change, was the result of his having too little faith in the power of theatre. In fact, he did not fully realize the power of theatre when he was involved in proscenium productions.

Since the first play written by Sircar for the open theatre format of production had been *Spartacus*, this was a production that he always held in high esteem. The play came about through a long and rigorous process that began with Sircar reading Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus*, several years earlier. Upon reading it, he had felt that it would be a major challenge to dramatize the novel. Indeed, he initially felt that only a greater dramatist or a better theatre person than himself could compress the range and diversity of this work of fiction within the limited framework of a play. What inspired Sircar to attempt this dramatization was however the success of another of his plays, *Sagina Mahato* (a play originally written for a proscenium stage) in the Open Theatre format. In writing *Spartacus*, Sircar thus always kept the concept of the performance space in his mind. He visited and measured out the venue where he would stage his first experimental production of the play. Such a keeping in mind of the dimensions of the performance arena was of course a standard procedure for Sircar, for even when writing for the proscenium stage, he would visualize where and how the actors would move, stand or sit. The writing of the playscript of *Spartacus* nevertheless was not an easy task, and he thought that the first draft that he had composed was too long, and that it would take at least four hours to perform. Hence he began revising the script over a year long process of workshops and rehearsals. Gradually, dialogues came to be cut and modes of non-verbal communication began to prevail over the spoken word. In the end however Sircar came to regard *Spartacus* as a notable landmark in both his personal career as a dramatist and in the history of his group. Yet, he claimed that he had never thought of the audience reception while writing or producing the play, and that it was

only later that he came to feel that *Spartacus* had been able to successfully reach out to the audience.

The audience factor also played an important role in Sircar's writing of *Bhoma*. This play was the result of Sircar's first-hand exposure to a rural environment, its people and their lives. There had been a political consciousness and a philosophical outlook in *Spartacus* too, but *Bhoma* was unique in that in this play the realization of politics and philosophy was not abstract but concretely experimental. Upon having visited the rural hinterlands of India, Sircar came to gain a first-hand experience of an India that he had never seen or known of before. His earlier ignorance had been perhaps inevitable, for as a city-dweller Sircar had never before been exposed to the problems of the peasants and the landless people in the villages. The process started when Sircar after coming back from Nigeria, found himself without a job. Not tied down in an office, he used to visit the villages of Ramchandrapur and Singjole for one or two days every week. Around this time too, a scientist friend of his gave him a U.S. Presidential report from which he learnt that it took 40 thousand years for radioactivity to decay. Also, while working in Calcutta Metropolitan office he had come to know from a survey report about the industrialists of Howrah's Belilious Road and Kolkata's Tangra area. All of this information affected and cast an influence over Sircar's mind and imagination. He began to embody his impressions and his new realizations in a series of dramatic fragments, disconnected scenes, the scripts of which he occasionally showed to some of the members of his group. Later, when there was the need for a new play to be produced, these fragments were stitched together into the new play, *Bhoma*. In this sense, *Bhoma* was different from the other of Sircar's plays in that it was not written out as a full-fledged play script but composed out of dramatic bits and pieces patched together like a collage to form a new whole.

The production of *Bhoma* through a series of workshop sessions also marked a watershed in the practice of Badal Sircar as playwright and director. In his early days he had followed the Western practice of keeping production notes. He used to note down and even diagrammatically illustrate such stage directions like "Downstage Left"

and “Downstage Right” on the blank left side pages of his drama manuscript notebooks. He had earlier even used toothpaste tube caps to create two-scale models. The result had been a director’s theatre, one in which the actors had no contribution to make beyond embodying and actualizing the dramatist’s vision through their own performances on stage. The Open Theatre model changed all this. As the focus came to be laid more on subject matter or content, it became necessary for each individual actor to come to terms individually with the decided upon subject matter. In the earlier director’s theatre, the actor did not have to think by himself or herself, but had to only follow the director’s instructions. Now, however, the actor had to actively engage with the ideology present in the text. This procedure had several advantages. In the first place, it freed the director from having to think out things for the whole team by himself. Secondly, the many different inputs contributed by the several members of the team proved to be richer and more meaningful than the musings of a single director alone. Sircar’s method of mounting a production through a workshop rehearsal process in fact proved to be extremely productive. The process would start with the taking up of a scene. Beginning with the playscript, Sircar would make an initial suggestion about choreography etc. in the presence of all the Satabdi members, both active participants and non-active participants. It was the members of the group who would decide the method and the mode to be followed, and to conclude if the initial suggestion would work or not. A practical trial of the suggestion would follow, which if it was deemed to be unsuccessful or weak, would be substituted by another approach. Throughout, the emphasis was placed on the doing itself, and not on the discussion. Thus, through a process of trial and error would evolve something that worked. Yet no notes were even kept of the decisions arrived at, and if it so happened that the members did not remember, upon their rehearsal meeting again after a whole week, of what exactly had been decided upon the previous week, the process of experimentation would be started afresh. Inevitably, the result would be that the earlier solutions would be recalled with either no changes or perhaps with minor improvements.

According to Sircar, the workshop method of play production had

a number of major benefits. It gave birth to an interdependent, mutual, spontaneous and collective team spirit. It provided to be an excellent ground for a training in the utilization of space. In the individual actor it enhanced a sense of self-confidence and trust in both his/her physical as well as mental abilities, and contributed to the development of feelings of trust in others. In a sense of course, workshops were different from rehearsals. Beginning with the production of *Manushe-Manushe*, the workshop process became the new starting point for Sircar as a dramaturge, for right at the beginning of the play's production there was no pre-planning, no casting etc. but only a concentration on the content of theatre. The total procedure came to be exemplified in the mounting of *Kobita Montage*. Here, Sircar read out the words and allowed everyone to perform as they wished, using both sound and movement. And since the whole process would be done in a workshop, there would be a creative richness without indiscipline or anarchy. Interestingly, Sircar would never directly interfere in the output of the participants, for there would be a constant feedback from the participants themselves. Such feedback influenced Sircar's own reading, signaling to him when he needed to pause or to repeat speaking out a line of text. On occasions he would tell the actors to try and relate themselves to the other actors, to act in slow motion or to restrain themselves. This permitting of the actors to work according to their own instincts and understandings had the entirely positive effect of the actors internalizing the matter of the text. It often seemed then that if a poem was recited, it was not one written by poets like Birendranath Chattopadhyay or Phanibhusan, but by the actor/director himself. In this way by moving through as open a format of appreciation as possible, the choreography of the production emerged. There can be no doubt that this procedure was diametrically opposite to the one that had been followed earlier by Sircar. Whereas at earlier times, the planning of a production had started with the setting of the dramatic action or choreography, now it was the workshop system which gradually gave birth to the choreography.

Apart from being strongly innovative in technique, mode and form, Sircar's Open Theatre also possessed a distinctive ideological slant. This ideology was neither Leftist nor Rightist but political nonetheless in the

sense that a genuine political consciousness involves an insight into the hidden and secret machinations of power. As a playwright and dramaturge, Sircar was never a blunt propagandist for social change. He never wrote plays with a message or wrote any of them with a preconceived exhortation to change or to improve society. In his Open Theatre on the contrary, Sircar tried to expose the half-truths and myths that are created and circulated by the powers that be in society. It was his effort as a man of the theatre to uncover these distinctions of truth, to explore the operation of these myths in deceiving ordinary men and women. This was Sircar's specific intention in his writing (and production) of *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas*. In this play, Sircar delved into the facticity of the British exploitation of India and Indians during the colonial era. He attempted to portray not only the general facts of colonial exploitation but also to provide specific details about such exploitation. For instance, what is highlighted in the course of the play is not only how much capital the British had invested in India, but also how much profit was made by them, and how the profits were used by the profiteers. Rather similarly in *Bhoma*, Sircar brought to the fore facts unknown to city dwellers, of one-crop and three-crop farming, and even of the many struggles to survive of the factory owners of Howrah and Tangra, people who tended to be dismissed unsympathetically as 'capitalists' by many so-called enlightened people living in the cities. Sircar instead wished to indicate what was often left unnoticed or ignored, that the lives of the factory owners was inextricably conjoined with those of their workers, that it was the inability of the factory owners to get bank loans that often forced them to go out of business, resulting in their workers losing their livelihoods too. Sircar wanted to show that most small businessmen were not really capitalists at all, and that their plight was worse than that of prosperous shopkeepers who were never denigrated as 'capitalists.'

Even more revelatory was *Lakshmichharar Panchali* [Ballads of the Wretched] (1974) in which Sircar exposed the fact that even those who swore by communism had forgotten what communism really meant, and that they often tried to make others forget the real significance of communism. In Brecht, Sircar found a soul companion in that he felt

that the German playwright's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (which became *Gondi* in Sircar's adaptation) was not a European play at all but a contemporary Indian one. This was because the central idea of the play was regarded by Sircar as analogous to that of a child's relationship with its mother. The idea was that just as a child has a claim over a loving mother, so too the land of the peasant belong to the peasant, for it is he who nurtures it. Such a theme and its realization, Sircar thought was entirely appropriate to and in the Indian context. In Sircar's *Sada-Kalo* (1986) too there is a similar realization, that White-Black divide in (the then) South Africa was not exclusive to that nation alone, but was equally relevant to India too, for caste and class divisions are also endemic to our own country. Sircar claimed that this dimension of Open Theatre as a mode of the sharing of a consciousness was what marked Open Theatre off from all other directions in theatre performance such as the doing of theatre for the sake of doing theatre, or doing theatre for the sake of entertainment.

Of course the Third Theatre of Sircar did have its nay-sayers and critics. Some said it was motivated by a destructive desire to bring down proscenium theatre altogether. Against such criticism, Sircar noted that those who were involved in Third/Open Theatre were in fact more liberal and enlightened than the supporters of proscenium theatre. He stressed it was a fact that a greater number of Open Theatre workers spent their own time, energy and money to watch proscenium productions, than followers and participants of proscenium theatre came to watch Open Theatre productions. He also stated that the newly emerging generations of theatre enthusiasts – comparatively young men and women – were far more resistant to having ideas and ideologies forced upon them. It was in the openness of mind displayed by these young people that Sircar found a parallel in the ethos of Open Theatre.

The real effectiveness of Open Theatre was however not realized by Sircar through his own staging and performance of such theatre alone. He found it to be more actualized in the practice of participants in his workshops. Many of those who invited him to put up or conduct workshops were social workers who had deep and real contact with the marginalized and underprivileged in the villages. Their participation in

Sircar's workshops led to their conducting of workshops on their own, and finally to the people in the villages giving dramatic expression to their own conditions, situations and aspirations. Sircar's work thus became the starting point of a chain reaction, and its result was a snowballing development. His own role, Sircar described as that of a catalyst, but the effects of his activities were great enough to spread out over a large part of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Dalits here were especially influenced, as were many disadvantaged people in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Once a workshop was held by Sircar even in a place located within a so-called 'liberated zone' controlled by an ultra-leftist group. Many other activists like those associated with the Samudaya Movement in Karnataka which worked against obscurantism and the oppression of women, also joined his workshops.

Sircar was wholly convinced that his workshop method always amounted to more than the teaching of dramatic technique. Of course in many cases the workshop participants were theatre people who initially came to participate in order to learn new theatre methods. However, they soon realized goals and objectives that went much further than the mere learning of new acting methods and strategies. In many participants there were noticeable emotional and intellectual changes. Despite not being fully measurable, these changes often contributed to long-term after-effects in thought, perception, decision making and even the life-direction of those who took part in them. In a few cases, Sircar noted that often enough participation in his workshops brought about changes in the course of life and career by helping to germinate the seed of a potential that was already existent in a participant's mind or heart. There was the case of one such participant who was a rich man's son and was someone who could have pursued higher education in foreign lands. After his experience in a workshop, this young man however came back from Europe and America and started living amongst the Bauls in Birbhum, performing a one-man theatre in adivasi tribal or ethnic villages. Changes in perspective and attitude were also witnessed amongst those who attended a workshop that Sircar once held at the prestigious Birla Institute of Technology. In this institution frequented by the children of elites and the rich, Sircar came across a few students

who refused to consider the plight of the poor on the ground that this was not an issue that affected them personally. Yet, many other students admitted that they had learnt realities they had never thought of or known of before.

Sircar also conducted his workshops in England on four occasions. The first was in 1985 when three young men, unemployed activists who had joined one of Sircar's workshops in Kolkata, invited him to conduct a workshop in Britain. The venture was funded by raising small donations. Another workshop organized along the same lines was held the following year, in 1986. In 1989, Sircar went to England once again, this time using some of his own money since not enough funds could be raised through donations. The fourth visit took place in 1992, when Sircar was invited to conduct a three-week long session with ten students of the Drama Department of Birmingham University. Here he delivered two lectures, discovering in the process that his audience was not familiar with the practice of political theatre or Open Theatre. One of his own pieces that Sircar staged with the students as a "Work-in-Progress" production was *Manushe Manushe*. The mounting of this play, particularly the presentation of a tea-party scene, turned out to be a major problem. This was because the British actors themselves had no historical memory of hungry people fighting over a morsel of food. Sircar had to train them in this, and had to tell them stories of his personal memories of violence over the possession of food during the disastrous Bengal Famine of 1943. The subsequent performance was effective and moving since the actors had been imaginatively and emotionally opened up to the reality of hunger in a way they had never experienced before in their own lives and within the parametres of their indigenous culture.

Over his own lifetime, Badal Sircar also accomplished the writing of no less than around sixty-two plays and dramatic compositions. Apart from the ones discussed above, some mention must be made of the others too. For example, in 1961 Sircar wrote a play named *Samabritta*. Five years later was written *Jadi Aar Ek Baar* which was first performed on 26th February, 1976 at the Akademy of Fine Arts in Kolkata by the theatre group Bohurupee under the direction of Tripti Mitra. This was

a two-act drama, the first act having only two scenes. This play itself was an entertaining adaptation of the play *Dear Brutus* by the British dramatist J. M. Barrie. The theme of the play may be summed up as depicting the vanity of human wishes, and what is interesting about it is Sircar's use of a *deus ex machina* in the shape of an ancient genie who rises up from the depth of the sea once a year. The play depicts what happens when the genie fulfills the desires of two couples who have come to visit a sea-side resort. The individuals involved are the married couples Sanjoy and Atasi, and Ratikanta and Karuna. Atasi is dissatisfied with her husband for he is too poverty-stricken to afford all the luxuries that she desires. On the other hand, Ratikanta is a rich businessman whose wife Karuna is also deeply unhappy because of her rich husband's unfaithfulness. She dreams of getting a job and of living her life on her own terms. The advent of the genie transforms everything in the lives of the men and women concerned, as Atasi becomes the wife of a prosperous businessman, the unattached girl Banalata who has put up at the same hotel becomes the mistress of the lustful Ratikanta, and the unhappy Karuna exchanges places with Banalata, an employed and working girl. After the transformation, however, none of the characters find happiness, and gradually all the characters once again become disillusioned with their new lives. The genie appeared once again at this point and magically returns all the characters to their original relationships.

If *Jadi Aar Ek Baar* is a fantasy illuminating the ambiguity of human desire, a more experimental, imaginative and innovative play was *Beej* which was written in 1973. A species of symbolic drama, in this play the dramatist featured four abstract characters namely 'Shey' or 'He/Other', 'Meye' or 'Woman', 'Dwaitwa' or 'The Monster' and a 'Chorus.' The Chorus represents a worldview which holds that life is only about waking up, going to work and coming back home. The Beast or the Monster opines that living signifies no more than a hedonistic seeking of pleasure and the satisfaction of desires. Contrary to these views is the attitude of the Woman who declares that the real point of life is existence itself, that is the will to live. This vision of course finds opposition from the other characters, but Sircar appears to indicate that

it is important that the vital force of life should always oppose all the obstacles that may come in its path, and that in doing so it will triumph always. Another play which was written in 1973 was *Prastab*[Proposal] that was first performed by Satabdi in 1974.

Two other Open Theatre productions of Badal Sircar which were first performed in Curzon Park on 19th October, 1974 need to be mentioned at this point. These plays were *Laxmi Chharar Panchali* and *Bhanumati ka Khe*[The Game of Bhanumati] (1974), both of which are distinguishable by their eschewing of any storyline. In the first play, the old folk tradition of the ‘*ganer larai*’ or argument through the singing of songs in a sort of public debate was employed together with elements of cross-talk. In the other play the same *kabir larai* form was combined with the performance style of the roadside Indian ‘*madaris*’ or street-side conjurers. Three months later on 18th June 1975 was performed in the same open air venue at Curzon Park another play entitled *Rupkathar Kelenkari*. Unlike the previous two plays, this play involved a kind of storyline even as the Kabigan format was once again used. Essentially a satire on the inner workings of the newspaper industry, the play is set in a newspaper office peopled by sundry journalists and editors. What becomes pronounced through the action is the corruption that is prevalent in the print media industry. Sircar in his play shows how journalists shape and mould public opinion and beliefs for their own narrow commercial and sectarian political ends. These serious issues are however cast and embodied in the form of an entertaining comedy, even though critics like Samik Bandyopadhyay and Pratibha Agrawal are of the opinion that the laughter induced by the play substantially detracts from the seriousness of the themes dealt with in this play.

Apart from *Rupkathar Kelenkari*, another Open Theatre play named *Natyakarer Sandhane Tinti Charitra* was written by Badal Sircar in early September 1974. Its playscript was published in the journal *Angan* only in 1998. The title of the play is deliberately reminiscent of the theatre group Nandikar’s successful production of their adaptation of Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* which was named *Natyakarer Sandhane Chhoyti Charitra* in the Bengali version. Sircar’s play however has nothing in common with either the European play or

its Bengali adaptation. Instead, Sircar drew upon his personal experiences of visiting rural environments to tell a story of the division widely prevalent in India between the rich, the middle class and the poor. In Sircar's play, each of these classes is given a name and a personality, figuring as characters named the 'Expensive', the 'Not So Expensive' and 'The Cheap' respectively. Every class or category is shown to be in search of a playwright who can express the views and opinions of each particular class before a wider audience so as to justify its own position. Significantly, each character-category is also linguistically marked according to its station in society. The 'Expensive' for instance often speaks in English, while the 'Not So Expensive' uses English words less frequently, and 'The Cheap' talk only in the vernacular language and in its local dialect. The first to speak is 'Expensive' who is a capitalistic wealth seeker. Next the 'Not So Expensive' is given the opportunity to speak out, and Sircar indicates that this character representing the middle class in society occupies a medial position. The people of this class often speak out against exploitation and talk about revolution, but are easily distracted from these aims and effectively silenced by the economic sops occasionally thrown at them by the 'Expensive' in the shape of jobs and assurances about a more prosperous and better future. The most eloquent speaker however is 'Cheap' who had long been denied the opportunity of expressing his own thoughts. 'Cheap' speaks of his own sufferings, the history of his own exploitation, and even about his unfulfilled desires. *Natyakarer Sandhane Tinti Charitra* was therefore written by Badal Sircar to articulate some of his own ideas about the social and economic stratification that he himself had perceived upon living in the city and after having visited the rural areas of the country. It may also be noted that this play foreshadows Sircar's later and more famous play, *Bhoma*.

Sukhpathya Bharater Itihas was first enacted on 17th December 1976 at the Theosophical Society Hall by Satabdi under the direction of Badal Sircar himself. A play belonging to the Open Theatre form, the title of the play which translates as *Indian History Made Easy* may be mistaken as depicting the many incidents in the history of India, the rise and fall of kings and empires, the several wars which were fought over

time, and even the plunder and destruction of wealth and property. These material events are however none of Sircar's concerns in the play. What he concentrates on is instead a kind of economic history, as the characters involved - Britannia representing the colonial British empire, a Master, three Teachers, Mother India and a few students - play out and gradually realize the fact that it is capitalism and its greed which is behind Indian and world history. Sircar believed that the true meaning of history could be discovered not by taking into consideration the events themselves but by understanding and becoming aware of the avarice and the thirst for power manifested as the capitalist-imperialist will to dominate. The decline and fall of empires, the death and destruction of countless human beings, the history of pillage and rapine were regarded by Sircar as manifestations of an all-consuming economic greed. *Sukhapathya Bharater Itihas* therefore embodies this historical consciousness of Sircar, even as it indicates the pent-up stirrings of a reaction against capitalism, industrialization, imperialism and totalitarianism.

A few months later on 21st and 22nd July 1977, Sircar staged two different plays in the Theosophical Society auditorium. These were *Hattomalar Opore* and *Manikanchan*, the latter being based on several foreign plays that Sircar was familiar with. *Hattomalar Opore* on the other hand, was much more an original dramatic composition. Based on two stories written by the contemporary Bengali authors Premendra Mitra and Lila Mazumda respectively, Sircar used a well-developed linear plot in dramatizing the story of two close friends who become thieves because they have no other means to make a living. On one occasion upon being chased by a mob, they dive into a river and swim across it to arrive at a new country completely unlike *Hattomalar Desh* where they had lived for so long. In the new land, there are no rules or regulations or restrictions. All the requirements of men and women are taken care of. Food, clothes and even jewellery are provided to all without any charge. People work each according to their abilities and take according to their need. The world beyond *Hattomala* is therefore the stuff of dreams and the play itself is a utopian and communistic envisioning of a classless and conflictless egalitarian society. Reacting to a question that was asked of him in an interview published in the

newspaper *Anandabazar Patrika* on 13th August 2005, Sircar said that he has been inspired to write the play by a line in an old song that ran in his mind often ‘You have to have a dream for the dream to come true.’ *Hattomalar Opore* is therefore an optimistic envisioning of an utopia.

Badal Sircar’s next dramatic production was *Captain Hurrah* which was performed in the Open Theatre format on 22 November 1977 in the same Theosophical Society auditorium. The play had been originally written by the dramatist Mohit Chattopadhyay and performed by the Nakkhatra Theatre group under the direction of Shyamal Ghosh. What Sircar did was to make the play suitable for an Open Theatre mode and format.

This was to be one of the final productions of Badal Sircar in the Theosophical Society Hall, and the next play he staged was *Ekti Hatyar Natya Kahini* [Dramatic Tale of one Murder] which was mounted at the Sindhi Youth Association Hall on 1st August, 1980. *Ekti Hatyar Natya Kahini* was a Bengali adaptation of Peter Weiss’s play *Marat / Sade*.

The production, again at the Sindhi Youth Association Hall, that followed was of *Nagini Kanyar Kahini*, staged on 6th August 1982. A dramatized version of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay’s novel of the same name, *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* was a joint production of no less than three theatre groups, Badal Sircar’s own theatre group Satabdi, together with the Ritam and Pathosena groups. Then, in 1984, Badal Sircar wrote his play *Sniri* which was first performed by Satabdi group in 1985. Badal Sircar’s *Shana Baurir Katha* (1985) was performed by the Satabdi group under the direction of Bisakha Sarkar on 30th August 1985 at the Theosophical Society Hall. Badal Sircar’s *Janmabhumi Aj* was performed by the Satabdi under the playwright’s direction on 23rd May 1986 at the Theosophical Society Hall. This poetic montage was actually a collection of poems written by Birendra Chattopadhyay, Manibhushan Bhattacharya and Sircar himself. It expressed a deep concern for the destitute, showing both resentment and anger, and it obliquely focused on the contemporary Indian political scenario. *Churna Prithibi*, another collage, was both written and directed by Badal Sircar and jointly produced by Satabdi and Pathasena on 12 May 1988 at Sindhu Bhavan. Here, Sircar highlighted

the plight of the common, underprivileged people and concentrated on a somewhat similar socialist concern. The same year, i.e. in 1988, Badal Sircar wrote his short play *Dampatya* which remains till now, unpublished. Two years after *Churna Prithibi*, Badal Sircar wrote another play *Bioscope* in 1989, and this was performed by Satabdi under his direction on 6th June 1989 in Kolkata. About the play, Manujendra Kundu has said that dialogue of *Bioscope* is

...full of frivolity indicative of social incongruity. Suddenly without any prior warning the uncle starts shouting at his nephew in a fit of rage; henceforth, the direction of the play alters completely. The motif of eradication as we have noticed in *Bhoma* and *Basi Khabar* occur only to show a grim possibility of survival.²

Four years after writing *Bioscope*, 1993 Sircar composed the play *Ka Cha Ta Ta Pa* which debunked the conventional pattern of social acceptance. Set in a dream sequence, this play talks about a world where everyone stringently follows regulations like the inflexible grammatical rules of language. This place is called 'Bhajangantadham' in the play. Apart from this, another important play is Sircar's *Chaduibhati*, a play adapted from Fernando Arrabal's *Picnic in the Battlefield*. This was first staged on 10 August, 1994 at Chitrabani by Satabdi group. Although this play starts on a boisterous manner, at the end the playwright's anti-war outlook is foregrounded. Badal Sircar offers a scathing critique of violence and bloodletting of war in this play. Yet another drama named *O Re Bihanga* [Oh Bird] was composed in 1994 and was first produced in 2009. *O Re Bihanga* draws upon excerpts from songs and poems of Tagore to drive home its message. The entire action takes place in a room that is used for rehearsals. The people who frequent the room come from the lower strata of society like daily labourers. *Bagalacharitmanas* (1997) was first performed on 15th July, 1988 at an Upper Primary school at Sarshuna, Behala in Bengali by the Ayena theatre group under the direction of the playwright himself. The play presents the story of an orphan who confronts social iniquities, and brings to the surface the complex negotiations between attributes and an active human will. Much more experimental in form was Sircar's adaptation of Manik Bandyopadhyay's novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* which

was staged in an Open Theatre format on 22nd May, 1990 at Theosophical Society Hall. The whole play was embodied more in an auditory mode, almost like a radio play, than in the usual audiovisual form typical of drama. A further experimentation on the part of Sircar was marked by his adaptation of Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* in the Open Theatre format at the Sindhi Youth Association Hall on 21st July, 1991. A few days later, Dipankar Dutta directed Sircar's play *Sada Kalo* (1994) which was based on the issue of apartheid in South Africa. Three other plays are also worth mentioned in this context, and they are *Andhakare* (1999), *Aeschylus er Natak* (2002) and *Parashuram* (2003). All of these are yet to be published, even though they may be considered to be Sircar's last plays since he did not write any more plays during the last eight years of his life.

Apart from his creative work in the medium of drama, Badal Sircar also wrote a number of prose works - mostly in Bengali but a few also in English. The first of his English language writings was published by Sircar himself as a slim monograph entitled *The Third Theatre*. This work which was published in 1978 was described by Sircar in his 'Introduction' as not an academic thesis but a report based on actual theatrical work put to test. The work itself grew out of a project entitled 'Workshop in Theatre in Synthesis' as a rural/urban link which had won Sircar a fellowship offered by the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund. Much later in 2009 when Sircar was 84, he published a volume entitled *On Theatre* which was a collection of all his English writings. The essays in this volume included not only the text of *The Third Theatre* but also the four essays, viz. *Buying and Selling in the Theatre*, (originally written in Bengali as *Theatre-er Becha Kena*, 1978 published in *Nanamukh* by Anjali Basu in 1988 translated in English by Sudeshna Banerjee; *Masks in Theatre* originally written in Bengali as *Theatre-er Mukhosh* in 1978 and published by Anjali Basu in the journal *Nanamukh*, and translated into English by Sudeshna Banerjee; *The Changing Language of Theatre*, delivered as the Moulana Abul Kalam Azad Memorial Lecture in 1981; and *Voyages in the Theatre*, which was originally the Shri Ram Memorial Lecture given in April 1992.

Apart from authoring essays on theatre, Sircar also penned a number

of stories in Bengali which were inspired workings or transcreations. These stories were occasionally published in contemporary Bengali journals but they were finally collected together and printed in a separate book entitled *Abar Galper Khonchay* in 2009. Yet another collection of tales which Sircar himself described as part 'rasas' or sketches were published along with four original stories in a later book in 2008 under the title *Panchmisali Galpo (Mixed Tales)*. Then from 2005 when Sircar turned 79 his pen took on a reminiscent turn. In May that year he published the first of many of his autobiographical narratives, a reminiscence of his travels in Southeast Asia, especially of Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. This volume was entitled *Bismaykar Shyamdesh*. The next year in December 2006 was published another book detailing Sircar's experiences while travelling and residing outside India. The inspiration of publishing this volume entitled *Prabasher Hijibiji (Scribbling Abroad)* had come to Sircar in 1989 when he read some of his own letters to his sister Manu (Anjali Basu) and her husband Kanu (Asit Basu) together with the notes he had kept during his stay in London from 1957 to 1959, in France for nine months in 1963 to 1964, and in Nigeria over 1964 to 1967. But this was not all, for the volume also included poems written by Badal Sircar from the 1950s onwards. The rationale for the printing of the poetry was that the poems were indicative of the thoughts and ideas that had passed through Badal Sircar's mind over these years.

Next, in May 2006, May 2007 and October 2008, Badal Sircar published the three volumes of his autobiographical recollections in Bengali which he entitled *Purono Kasundi*. In the two parts of the first volume Sircar speaks of his memories of his childhood, of his family, his education and his work up to his departure for London in 1957. In the second volume of *Purono Kasundi* Sircar provided details about his work, both theatrical and professional, in various countries. In the third volume Sircar brings the reader up to date about his subsequent life to the point of his 82nd year.

Awards:

The genius of Badal Sircar as a dramaturge, playwright, director and

thespian was recognized by various institutions all over India. Honors had started coming his way right from the 1950s when he was less than 40 years old. He won the Best Play Award in the Girish Drama Competition in 1963. His greatness in the realm of theatre came to be acknowledged by such eminent personalities like M.R. Joshi, Marcel Proust, et al. A few years later in 1968 he was bestowed the Sangeet Natak Akademi award. In 1972 his contribution to Indian theatre was acknowledged by the Government of India which awarded him the Padmasri. Next, in 1995 he was elevated to the “Hall of Fame” in the Shiromoni Celebrations held at the Rabindra Sadan in Kolkata. The Sangeet Natak Akademi which is the Government of India’s most prominent academy for music, drama and dance honored him with both a Fellowship and the Ratna Sadasya title in 1997. Even stalwarts in the world of Indian cinema acknowledged the greatness of Badal Sircar. In 2003, he was felicitated on stage by the President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi. About two years after this, in October 2005, the “Tendulkar Mahotsab” organized by the famous film actor-director Amol Palekar to honor the dramatist Vijay Tendulkar was inaugurated with the release of a book and a DVD on Badal Sircar’s life. Another recognition came in the same year when Shyamanand Jalan, the eminent theatre personality and Director of the Padatik theatre and dance forum presented Sircar with a token of honour.

Later, in July 2009 when Sircar had his 85th birthday a special five-day long festival entitled ‘Badal Utsab’ was held at the Anamika Kala Sangam in Kolkata. This festival saw the staging of several of Sircar’s most famous plays. Then the next year, in 2010, many more awards and recognition were heaped on Badal Sircar. He was awarded the ‘Ammannur Puraksaram’ by the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi for his lifetime work in the field of theatre in India. A few months later Sircar was honored yet again with the Kritiam Mayest Award once again by the Kerala Sangeet Natak Akademi. This award initiated in the memory of the noted Keralite practitioner of the classical Sanskrit theatrical form of Kutiyattam Amanur Madheba Chakkhar, was bestowed on Sircar for his accomplishments in the field of Open Theatre. Next, in December

2010, Badal Sircar was conferred the degree of D. Litt. (*honoris causa*) by Jadavpur University. The degree was handed over to Sircar at the University's convocation ceremony on 24 December 2010 by Sri M.K. Narayana, the University's Chancellor and (the then) Governor of the State of West Bengal. Beyond all these, recognition of Badal Sircar's contributions came in the form of two documentaries that were made on his life and work. These films were shot and composed by Amshan Kumar and Sudev Sinha.



Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the President of India giving memento to Badal Sircar on occasion of Golden Jubilee of Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. Date: 28.06.2003



Governor of West Bengal and Chancellor of Jadavpur University, Sri M.K. Narayana conferring Degree of Doctor of Literature (*honoris causa*) upon Sri Badal Sircar on 24 December 2010.



Dr. Bhupen Hazarika giving fellowship (1997) to Badal Sircar
at his residence at Kolkata.



Badal Sircar (at the right corner) with from left: Mohon Rakesh, Jaswant D. Thaker, Suresh Awasthi on the occasion of Sangeet Natak Akademi Award 1968.



Shyamanand Jalan felicitating to Badal Sircar
on the occasion of Rang Swaran, 2003.

The life of this legendary theatre person who was Badal Sircar came to an end on 13 May 2011. He was 86 years old when he passed away, and leaving behind a substantial corpus of work, comprising no less than over sixty complete plays, a few poems and stories, essays and autobiographical writings. He had been suffering from cancer of the colon for over two years before his demise, and when he died he left behind his wife Mira (Dr. Bisakha Ray), a son Abhijit and a daughter Bharati. He had pledged his mortal body for medical research to the Nil Ratan Sircar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, and the corneas of his eyes were harvested and given to other patients to enable them to see. Upon his passing away, both theatre personalities and eminent citizens of Kolkata came to the hospital to pay homage to this great soul. The news of his death was widely reported in the media even though public attention was distracted on that day with the news of a change in government in West Bengal. Apart from the major newspapers, obituaries and articles remembering this great thespian were published

in theatrical journals and other publications. Two major articles were published in Bangladesh on 15 May 2011 in the newspapers *Pratham Alo* and *Destiny* which not only covered Sircar's family details, but also provided information about his life and works. On the same date, that is four days after Sircar's demise, the Mumbai paper *Mumbai Mirror* published a feature on Sircar, and the theatre personality and director Meghnad Bhattacharya expressed his view in the Bengali daily *Aajkal* that Badal Sircar had been an unparalleled theatre personality in India. Meghnad Bhattacharya also stated that a condolence meeting on Badal Sircar would be held. Then the Bengali theatre weekly *Natya Mukha Patra* there was published a piece by Arijit Roy, a former actor of Badal Sircar's Satabdi group. In *The Telegraph* of 15 May 2011, theatre critic Ananda Lal wrote a long report titled "He who took portable drama where no group had gone". Another report was published in *The Times of India* on 15 May 2011 under the title "Sircar's body donated to city hospital." The report quoted the veteran stage director Bibhas Chakraborty as saying: "He [Sircar] was one of the best playwrights. You may not agree with his philosophy but you must accept that his plays had taken the theatre to the next level." Sudev Sinha who had made a documentary on Sircar entitled *A Face in the Procession* praised him as "the best playwright since Tagore. He stood out by exploring Third Theatre." In another news report published in *The Statesman* the next day under the caption *Badal Sircar: Bengal's Legendary Stage Icon* Sudev Sinha further went on to lament that: "It is almost criminal the way Sircar has been ignored in Bengal." Rudraprasad Sengupta the veteran Bengali theatre director of the Nandikar group also expressed his views in *The Times of India*, Kolkata, on 15 May 2011 in a feature published under the caption "He dared to tread a different Path." Remembering Sircar, Sengupta wrote:

Soon, I did have the chance to meet Sircar when he visited Nandikar and read out one of his plays. We sat mesmerized through the session and were mighty impressed. Here was a playwright who was as different from the rest as one could possibly be. His dialogues were smart, witty and crisp. He altered the structure of the play and addressed real, contemporary issues that were dealt

with in a bold, emphatic manner. They delivered a strong message. Watching a play by Sircar was an enriching experience and invariably served as an inspiration.... Sircar took a radical step. He rejected proscenium theatre in favour of what he termed “third theatre” for which he would perform on the streets, in village courtyards, on the fields and just about everywhere.³

Another report came out from New Delhi on 15 May 2011 in the leading newspaper *The Hindu* under the caption “Badal Sircar passes away”. Theatre critic Shamik Bag in an obituary titled “A radical innovator makes a quiet exit” published in *Mint* New Delhi wrote of Sircar’s

...vision of taking theatre outside the ambits and demands of proscenium auditoriums to the masses on the streets, factory gates, parks, and remote villages. In doing so, he is credited with taking theatre beyond the charms of commerce, which often ends up dictating terms, conditions and content for theatre productions. Sircar helped set theatre free, in more ways than the obvious. Despite facing harsh criticism from people like Utpal Dutta and other Leftist individuals, who considered Sircar to be a high-brow existentialist, the lifeblood for Sircar’s plays in the Third Theatre phase continued to be ordinary, even abjectly poor people.⁴

Yet another article was published on 18 May 2011 in the Bengali news-daily *Aajkal* with the title “A Stage in the name of Badal Sircar and Condolence in BESU.” “Badal Sircar evolved and defined his individual content, form, aesthetics and philosophy which he called ‘Third Theatre’”⁵, remarked theatre critic Shoma A. Chatterjee in a write-up that appeared in *The Statesman* on the same day under the caption “Unheard and unsung.” A few days after this, on Saturday 21 May, the Bengali newspaper *Dainik Statesman* published an article by Jayanta Bhattacharya on Badal Sircar. On 22 May theatre director and critic Prabir Guha wrote a long piece on Badal Sircar which was also published in the Bengali newspaper *Aajkal*. On 23 May 2011 a report was published in memory of Badal Sircar:

The hullabaloo over the state Assembly election results consigned the news of the death [of] the stage personality Badal Sircar to an insignificant position in different dailies. Interestingly, Sircar

had strong political views and felt that once a Leftist party joined a government, it loses its moorings. If subsequent events proved him right, he did not dwell on it. But Sircar's plays have ensured him a permanent place in the hall of fame of Bengali theatre.⁶

Mumbai based newspaper published a tribute to Badal Sircar with Sudev Sinha's report under the caption "Ebong Badal". Sinha observed "As I started interviewing him, [Sircar] I realized that there was one major factor that could not be discounted when dealing with the man-humor."⁷

Tributes and memorials continued to flood in even many days after the passing away of Sircar. Many of these were penned by ordinary people as letters to Editors of newspapers. One such letter was published in *The Statesman* on 29 May 2011 with the title "An Act to Remember". Sebanti Sarkar, a journalist in *The Statesman* also published an article with the title "Play with Pictures" on the same day i.e. 29 May 2011. C. K. Bhattacharjee a reader from Mumbai on 29 May wrote a letter in memory of Badal Sircar which was published in *The Telegraph* Kolkata stating that: "It seems a strange coincidence that Sircar, who wrote several 'anti-establishment' plays during the peak of the Naxal movement, passed away on the very day the Left Front was ousted from West Bengal."⁸ There was another letter that was published in the newspaper on the same date from a man named Adhip Kumar Basu from Kolkata who remarked: "Sircar will always be remembered as a master of the stage in the same vein as legends like Sambhu Mitra and Utpal Dutta."⁹ Madhuchhanda Sen wrote a letter to the editor of *Aajkal* the Bengali paper on 1 June 2011 with the caption "Sesh drishye Badal Sircar [Badal Sircar in the final scene]." In an obituary published in the 4 June 2011 issue of *Frontline* the New Delhi journal, Professor Mihir Bhattacharya, former professor of English and Film Studies in Jadavpur University asserted that Sircar's "plays have become part of the repertoire of theatrical modernism in India. Many were collaborative texts, mostly performed in the open, with minimalist appurtenances and no publicity, happening in the thick of other events."¹⁰ Then on 26 June 2011, Jagori Bandopadhyay wrote an article in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* under the caption "Takakarir chinta nei, Darshaker darbare bhinna theatre [No

worries about money, A different theatre for the audience].” In memory of Sircar’s demise, a report was also published in the daily *Kalantar* on 21 July 2011 under the caption “Delhir Greenroom Theatre.” Another report came out in the Bengali newspaper *Pratidin* on 15 July 2011 with the heading “Badal Din” (“Stormy Day”). In the edition of *Aajkal* dated 23 September 2011, there was another report entitled “Badal Smarane” (“Remembering Badal”). Yet another report was published in Bengali edition of *The Statesman* under the caption “Nataker Kobi Badal Sircar” (“Badal Sircar: Poet of Drama”) on 23 September, 2011.

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Flawed utopia paired with contemporary dystopia in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*: demystifying the masculine model through a feminist approach

Sujato Ghosh

Abstract

Churchill explores history and cultures in her masterpiece play, *Top Girls*. Among all her plays, including *Cloud Nine*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Owners*, *The Hospital at the Time of Revolution*, *Ice Cream*, *Hot Fudge*, and *Fen*, *Top Girls* remains one of the most remarkable. Benedict Nightingale describes the play as the play of the century. This play cannot be confined to a specific space and time; more importantly, it does not follow a linear plot. The play begins with feminism and ends with the same, but what makes it exceptional is its approach to society rather than targeting a particular male. Churchill draws inspiration from feminist history, transcending spatial boundaries to depict the struggle against patriarchy. There appears to be a sisterhood of feminism, as nearly all the female characters seem to break free from traditional patriarchal hierarchies, including the notion that only men can attain top positions in society and power. Churchill's female characters challenge norms, stand in solidarity, and advocate for women's civil rights. As seen at the start of Act I, this camaraderie crosses and transcends political, geographical, and historical barriers and timelines. According to Braidotti, recognising unity and harmony among women inherently creates a feminist stage that demands expression and voice (163). Churchill also suggests that the roots of feminist ideals stem from historical positions. Consequently, she brings characters from different historical contexts to rediscover their struggles in her present time and beyond. It is intriguing to see how these diverse historical positions interact, as if in conversation

with the host, Marlene. Although there may be a sense of solidarity among the guests, it seems to dissipate after they have taken their share of the drink offered by the host. Furthermore, the opening scene featuring diverse characters from different historical timelines can confuse the audience, as they surprisingly appear familiar with each other despite meeting for the first time; the host's introduction of the guests contributes to this effect. One might wonder what motivated Churchill to initiate such a complex gathering at the start of the play. Still, it serves to establish these characters' struggles and lend legitimacy to what is to come. The device of borrowing a character from another text, which Umberto Eco calls transmigration from one fictional dimension to another, is an effective way to utilise intertextual space to express one's perspective within the structure of the text (McHale 57). A closer look at the party guests reveals that they come from diverse social backgrounds, including educated, religious women, art enthusiasts, warriors, leaders, and women who have held positions of power.

Keywords: feminism, utopia, identity, struggle, gender, historical, politics

Not only is the timeline of the women who gather at the beginning of the play *Top Girls* different, but they also all come from diverse professions. In their respective roles, they challenge social norms. Churchill seizes this opportunity to rewrite and reaffirm her feminist stance in her postmodern work, *Top Girls*. Postmodernism enables feminist writers to retell and reshape feminist narratives, destabilise social conventions, and question the male gaze (Hutcheon 151). Isabella Bird from Japan is a concubine, while Lady Nijo has become a nun; among the guests is the legendary Pope Joan of the nineteenth century, and they visit a sixteenth-century painting in the names of Dulle Griet and Patient Griselda. All have made exemplary contributions to transforming women's lives and inspiring future generations. However, each female character remains confined to her perspective, and none seems to confront or agree with one another directly. The tension arises when the characters listen to each other's stories. However, what they are most interested in and eager to showcase are their struggles and the problems they have overcome in life. In Churchill's fantastical spectacle—

a metaphor for the complex and diverse experiences of women—there is less unity among genders but more emphasis on individuality; however, this does not diminish the characters' roles in advancing women's liberation from patriarchy. Accusations fly, and brutal insults are exchanged. Lady Nijo labels Isabella Bird as barbaric, and Bird responds in kind. Marlene's attempt to support one guest while disregarding another reveals bias and ignorance of the different values belonging to each woman's timeline. If the play is based on Margaret Thatcher's triumph, it serves as a commentary on how the women's movement in earlier years aimed at a shared goal for all women—an idealistic, yet impractical endeavour. True universality in the women's movement is impossible, as complications, differing perspectives, and individual or sectional interests create obstacles. Setting a singular goal for women across all political, social, and economic backgrounds is Utopian. Churchill believed that recognition and repentance are vital to the true success of a feminist movement, understanding that women are not a homogeneous group. Perspectives should be prioritised to craft and refine a collective agenda. The audience expects that, as the play unfolds, the women will naturally unite, voice solidarity, and raise their glasses in a toast; that is the playwright's aim. At least at the start of the gathering, as they celebrated Marlene's success, that unity seemed to prevail. However, as the scene progresses, the tension persists as these renowned historical women focus on asserting their causes and personal love, rather than coming together in harmony.

Marlene spent her life chasing success, even at the expense of her daughter. Although we see her life until the end of the play, one must assume she endured torment and disgust; yet, her career mattered more to her than her daughter's upbringing. Isabella pursued her dreams in the same way. Nijo, though initially happy, later suffered regret because the holy people around her fell for her, and she even caused the priest Ariake to fall in love with her. One wonders how she is responsible for such a fall. However, Churchill highlights the ongoing internal struggle within a woman's mind, especially those fighting to establish their place in society. Nijo even blames herself for her father not reaching heaven because she woke him during his prayer, just before his death. Churchill

aims to draw our attention to the inner and outer battles faced by women. One can imagine the challenges women face when they must adopt a man's role to establish themselves. Pope Joan only succeeded when she disguised herself as a man and entered the world of politics. She became male inside, and later forgot her womanhood. Working within a male-dominated, hegemonic power structure is tough, and one shudders at the struggles these women endured to find their place. Pope Joan disguised herself as a man to gain power. When her true gender was revealed, the world did not believe her, nor did God, and she believed even womanhood betrayed her. She took her own life after giving proof of her womanhood by giving birth during the holy procession of the Pope. It is easy to criticise her, but that was the only way she could find freedom and identity at that time. Churchill exposes the brutal inhumanity of male hegemonic power during that era. Giving up one's gender, identity, culture, and selfhood to achieve one's dreams is no small feat; it requires immense strength of mind and body to transform from female to male, and Pope Joan achieved this. Criticism of her is understandable, but her accomplishments cannot be ignored. At the same time, her remorse for losing her gender and femininity must be recognised. Churchill justly presents the woman from this perspective. Critics like Elin Diamond argue that Churchill conveys all of this in a manner reminiscent of Brechtian alienation, where the stage is less about the spectacle and more about the message. Therefore, audiences or readers must look beyond the stage actions and engage their minds to interpret what the author is trying to reveal or depict (49).

The initial response of any critic to the play's first scene is one of chaos, where nobody listens to anyone. It is important to note that Churchill here conveys a message warning female society that female solidarity to establish justice against all injustices done to women is one of the primary conditions for the progress of women in a society where men are unlikely to give women opportunities to advance, especially if they aspire to rise to the top. Understanding this dystopia is therefore crucial for the readers. It is natural for some critics to label the guest, Marlene, as an egotist and a selfish person. Still, interestingly, many believe that this chaos and the attempt to overlap with one another while

narrating their stories based on individual struggles create a form of communion. In this unity, a kind of organic whole develops. That Marlene, at least in the initial phase of the play, is a woman of character, but that she desperately possesses the shrewdness of a businesswoman is revealed when she encourages Jeanine to lie and, at the same time, gives and takes back the job from her, showing her temperament. This is significant in the context of viewing the play as a specimen of feminist and character studies. No less important is the relationship between Angie and Kit, and their bond is so intimate that Angie immediately responds to Kit's menstrual blood by licking the blood from her fingers and asking her to do the same when she has hers. There is a sense of desperation in the relationship. Often, the two girls are the more intelligent and less emotional characters. To her alone, Angie confides that Marlene is her mother, and her turbulent relationship with Joyce is primarily a result of this.

The interviews conducted by Marlene and her colleagues confirm that their recruitment process does not follow consistent corporate guidelines, and they readily reject candidates based on their experience and age. Louise's example serves as a simple illustration of how women are perceived within a patriarchal societal structure. Win tells Louisa that she will not be able to compete for her position against younger businesspeople and suggests that Louisa consider a role in a cosmetic company where she might be better suited. Patriarchy prevents those who attempt to conform to its norms from prospering. Caryl Churchill aims to highlight that women seeking liberation must establish their own standards, as submitting to patriarchal expectations only makes life more difficult and vulnerable. This is precisely what happens to aspiring women like Louise.

The character of Marlene reveals itself in the final scene, which takes place almost a year later, and her career becomes more important than her newborn child. Since then, Angie has been raised by her sister Joyce. Many critics believe that Marlene's rise is linked to Joyce's decision to adopt Angie. The conversation between Marlene and Joyce reaches its climax when Marlene justifies the abandonment of her daughter to Joyce, saying that she knows someone who is a managing director

and breastfeeds her children in the boardroom because she is highly paid. Joyce replies that this does not prove her innocence nor justify her actions—getting pregnant at seventeen and abandoning her daughter to her sister for the sake of a glittering career. Therefore, it can be said that Marlene's career advancement comes at the expense of her daughter. Although successful, Marlene has yet to come to terms with her loss and feels the pressure of missing out on Angie's childhood, which she considers an irreparable loss. The loss of childhood is arguably the most significant loss in life, and Marlene learns this at a tremendous cost. Churchill's questions in the play concern the delicate balance between career and motherhood, as well as the definition of a successful life (Tycker 1).

Critics have reflected on the characters portrayed in the play's first scene. Many historical figures are introduced, but who did Churchill most want to credit for the fight against patriarchal dominance? The answer is difficult to determine, as each has succeeded in their own way. However, regarding the actual characters in the play, Churchill aims to credit Joyce but also seems hesitant, as she understands the many obstacles in portraying Joyce as one of the most successful figures in her life, and the idea of women's empowerment may limit this portrayal. Joyce might be seen as successful in supporting women's empowerment, but it is challenging to depict her as the central figure or as a symbol of this cause. Historical women shared many uncommon traits, yet they all possessed a common thread that united them and can be defined. Conversely, modern women are a diverse group that perhaps shares little in common and are often estranged from one another in terms of ideas, actions, and arguments. These women defy easy definition by a single thread. They are, in essence, heterogeneous. Their approach to life is also one of detachment and immersion in diversity. They are, in true modern fashion, varied and distinctive. Watching the play, one senses that Margaret Thatcher's politics do not entirely convince Churchill, although she believes the Prime Minister is faithful to her role. Still, this does not hide her true nature. She may falter with her family, something Churchill does not consider a perfect state of women's liberation. It is therefore unsurprising that Angie needs to criticise Marlene

and others like her to justify her anguish, or that she can channel her frustration into energy to develop strategies that help her build herself, contribute to the corporate world, forge strong relationships with fellow feminists, and ensure the legacy endures for future generations.

Reading the play, one might feel some confusion about the setting of feminism. Wandor states, “Bourgeois feminism accepts the world as it is, and sees the main challenge of women as simply a matter of ‘equaling up’ with men; in other words, what men already do is seen as the norm” (134). Wandor is confident that the play promotes bourgeois feminism. Other critics argue that Churchill advocates the profound ideas of liberal feminism; however, placing this idea alongside the play as a whole can be unsettling for the reader. By the end of the play, one wonders about Marlene’s fate. Reading the play, one may not hesitate to blame Marlene for Angie’s circumstances. Marlene is not portrayed very well, which may lead to questioning Churchill’s approach to liberal feminism. However, a closer look at the play reveals that Churchill does not necessarily see the situation as dystopian; instead, he suggests that women’s increasing roles are a necessary step towards societal progress. Churchill also develops personal relationships and shows that Marlene suffers internally due to her behaviour with Angie and her irresponsibility in her youth. Additionally, he ensures that, in the end, Angie understands everything, and Marlene’s suffering is alleviated. Kritzer is correct in saying that the audience may feel confused by the clash between the two sisters at the end of the play. Nonetheless, the audience must remember there is an alternative to this clash, more significant than the conflict itself — and that is the future for women. This alternative exists, and the audience should envisage it. A sense of solidarity in women’s narratives is essential (148).

Churchill advocates for liberal feminist ideologies. Still, many readers believe that the play, from the beginning to the middle segments, does not portray women in a favourable light, and shirking responsibilities is not a concern that feminism addresses. Many critics claim that the ideals portrayed in the play undermine the women’s movement by perpetuating irresponsible behaviour by men, and Marlene is never

presented in a positive light. The rise of women in patriarchal societies does not imply or mean prioritising a career over other essential life responsibilities. Great feminist writers and theorists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Kate Millett, never proposed such an idea, nor did Elaine Showalter prescribe such a reform in her works. Therefore, portraying Marlene as an individual without responsibilities may not be the right approach to kickstart a revolution that is already emerging. Readers at one time may even see it as hopeless, and the trauma of being a woman is likely to persist. One recalls Mohanty in this context and how he called for a new form of sisterhood, where camaraderie among women would help establish their rights. However, that needs to be established; some unity must be forged, and that unity must be worked for. History remembers the struggles that should be unified, at least on the part of women, and this struggle must be recognised to achieve a true sense of women's rights (84). The rise of Marlene and the controversy surrounding it led us to think that the fate of a woman is somehow bound by traditional anti-feminist patterns that constantly drag her down to the patriarchal level. This idea will gradually take root if no alternative is presented, if no characters in the play recognise it, or even without any social uprising or influence over other characters. Churchill, a staunch believer in socialism, believed that the future of feminism lies not in advocating conservatism but in progress through socialist reforms in society, so that the ultimate message of feminism can be conveyed. Janelle Reinelt may be correct when she suggests that perhaps no feminist is as socially and successfully represented as Churchill, at least in the context of the second wave of feminism (174).

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From Page to Screen: Shakespeare in Tollywood

Arnab Chatterjee

Abstract:

Shakespeare's journeys to Bengal are not restricted from the page to the stage but proceeds to reach the screen. The question whether Shakespeare is our contemporary or not has been rendered redundant not merely by the directors of the stage but also by the directors of the film as they continuously make him contemporary and keep the 'Shakespeare industry' alive. The tendency to go back to Shakespeare and to create indigenous versions of adaptations does not necessarily reflect a colonial mindset as the Bengali film adaptations and appropriations reflect plurality of Shakespeare and a network of intertextual space where the notion of the self and the centre seem flexible and contingent. The directors of Tollywood do not merely insert quotations from Shakespeare or select scenes from Shakespeare. They reinstate them as the auteur because they can exercise complete control over their films and leave their creative imprint in the style and theme of their films.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Tollywood, adaptation, appropriation, auteur

Introduction:

The dialogues between Shakespeare and his stage directors and film directors take myriad nuanced routes of cultural articulation. In case of cinematic or dramatic adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare, there is a consistent attempt to reposition Shakespeare to add relevance to the spatio-temporal framework of the production and reception of the text. In the age of producing Indian Shakespeares, Tollywood industry actively participated in creating their own Bengali Shakespeare in film obliterating elements of foreignness. Initially scenes from Shakespeare's

play was enacted or explicit references were made to Shakespeare's play and then the directors tried their hand at simple adaptations and radical appropriations to suit the ideological concerns of their time. Shakespeare's plays are complex enough to be open to myriad interpretations- through the discourses concerning the Renaissance, modern, postmodern and postcolonial. But these plays are very passionate and exciting performances meant for the commoners as well as for the intellectuals. For this reason, a Renaissance play written in England can entice Bengali audience. Tollywood directors explored Shakespeare in their own way and made their presence felt in the project of providing afterlives of Shakespeare. Are the Bengali film makers interested in Shakespeare because of the universality of the themes of his plays that can easily cross borders and boundaries of culture as well as time and space? One must remember that the film has to be sold in the market and Shakespeare can also serve as a potential site to be packaged as a marketable commodity. Therefore a series of experimentation from intertextual references to the enactment of unabridged scenes to a series of adaptations and appropriations recast Shakespeare in Tollywood. An evaluation of Shakespeare in Tollywood films from the black and white screen to our times brings forth the complex relationship between literature and film laying bear the changing strategies with which adaptation has been forever associated, from providing loyalty to an original text to offering a vehicle for re-interpretation as per the demand of time and space. AniaLoomba and Martin Orkin contend that "there is no single "Shakespeare" that is simply reproduced globally" (7).

Adaptation and Appropriation

The term 'adaptation', in the context of film, has been usually associated with the re-imagining of a text from the print to the cinematic medium. Jack Jorgen in *Shakespeare On Film* (1977) provides the theory of the 'three degrees of distance' categorized as 'presentation', where the film is a visual duplication of the verbal text; 'interpretation' where the film owes its allegiance to the text but also insists on its individual artistic expression; and 'adaptation' where the film uses the text as the base material for creating something absolutely original (7-10). Louis Gianetti in *Understanding Movies* (1972) states that there are primarily

three types of adaptations – literal (stays faithful to the original text in both theme and tone), faithful (is not a word to word imitation, but recreates the tone of the novel in the film) and loose (independent pieces of work, casually relying on the source texts).

All these categorization of adaptation, knowingly or unknowingly places an importance on the degree of faithfulness to the new as a yardstick for the appraisal of an adapted version. However, if ‘intertextuality’ refutes the independence of meaning and affirms that meaning is created in relation to one another, thereby also implying that no text is original but simply a rewriting, assembled from already existing texts, then the question of fidelity becomes redundant.

Robert Stam, in *Literature and Film*, puts forward the idea of logophilia, or “the valorization of the verbal,” and an often resultant iconophobia, an aversion for engraved images (6) as the poor logic behind this hierarchy. The notion is constructed around the idea that films are impotent to translate the telling medium perfectly into the showing medium, and even if it does, it is undeniably an inferior one, since it restricts imagination. However, the structuralist and post-structuralist theoretical waves in the 1960s and 1970s contribute to the subversion and dismantling of many of these binaries and hierarchies, which bring about a significant change in the theory of adaptation.

Bela Balazs argues for the impossibility of a transposition from literature to film asserting that every “serious and intelligent adaptation” is “a re-interpretation” (Harrington11). Robert Stam in *Beyond Fidelity*, uses Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism to construct his own view of adaptation as an act of intertextual dialogism where “Film Adaptations are caught up in the on-going whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation with no clear point of origin” (Corrigan 66). Stam further expands and elaborates his arguments in his most recent contributions *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (2005) and *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (2005).

Post-structuralist critics project filmic renditions as intertextual works and as critical interpretations of literary texts, which elaborate and expand the reading of the source texts that are in turn informed by a number of other intertexts. Thus the very concept of ‘origin’ is negated and deferred. This substantiates Barthes’ view that “any text is an intertext” (Young 39) and Kristeva’s too, who emphasizes similar notion in her essay, “The Bounded Text” (1980), that authors do not create their texts, but merely compile from pre-existing texts so that a text becomes “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text” (15). Thus the focus of evaluation is gradually shifted from fidelity to intertextuality. The root of the problem lies with the fact that ‘Adaptation’ being an umbrella term includes within its periphery diverse notions like intertextuality, self-reflexivity, nostalgia, remaking, pastiche, parody and spin-off. The specific third category of adaptation, that all the theoreticians make (‘analogy’ for Wagner, ‘transforming’ for Dudley and ‘loose adaptation’ for Gianetti) is a very unstable, porous and all-encompassing one resulting in the creation of something new which may better be segregated as a different genre altogether. Noting the subversive quality of this particular category that has the potentiality to alter the original, critics like Douglas Lanier and Julie Sanders use a different term to denote and demarcate it as ‘appropriation’.

The word ‘appropriation’ suggests a forceful takeover, a commandeering of authority over the original, in a way that is steeped in contemporary sensibilities and urgent political demands of culture. Julie Sanders, in *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005), has differentiated the two terms, in her chapters entitled “What is Adaptation?” and “What is Appropriation?” Sanders elaborates that an “adaptation” may contain alterations, rewritings, and omissions and there may also be interpolations and additions, but an adapted work will still remain recognizable to the source text, retaining its original point of enunciation. She further states that:

Adaptation can be a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself ... indulging in the exercise of trimming and pruning ... engaged in addition, expansion, accretion, and interpolation ... involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved most often

by offering a revised point of view from the 'original,' adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced or marginalized. Yet adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the process of proximation and updating (18-19).

The author can no longer claim the sole authority of the text, as meaning is not contained within one utterance; it is trapped in a web of intertextual references, where the filmmaker is as much of an original author as the author of the written text. Sanders further states that appropriation

... frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations. But the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signaled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. (26).

The use of the word 'appropriation' thus minimizes the chances of confusion by segregating itself partially from 'straight adaptations.' Though there are instances where adaptations and appropriations often intersect and interrelate and it may be even argued that all adaptations are not appropriations but all appropriations are adaptations, yet it is necessary to maintain a certain clear, technical and terminological distinctions between the two. Re-contextualization is an important factor for appropriation and this paper investigates as to how in the different works by Shakespeare is completely re-contextualized and transformed, creating a crossover zone with diverse disciplines like literature, film studies and history, coalesced into the creative and novel rendition of an old story. The appropriated texts or films retain their affiliation to the source text by retaining its title, plotline or character names, but themselves become original works of the filmmakers by transposing the language, offering original interpretations and situating into a whole new cultural context. Thus appropriations offer the scope to compare the cultural matrix of both traditions (the source and adaptation) and even

provide the filmmakers with the opportunity to create verbal and visual analogies that bridge or compare two disparate cultures and histories. According to Jonathan Bate the history of appropriation may suggest that “Shakespeare” is not a man who lived from 1564 to 1616 but a body of work that is refashioned by each subsequent age in the image of itself” (3).

Idea of the Auteur Theory

François Truffaut’s ‘La politique des auteurs’ or the auteur theory as Andrew Sarris calls it was developed by a group of film enthusiasts who used to write for *Cahiers du Cinema*, one of the prominent magazines on film. The auteur theory came up in the 50s and 60s and its tenets were never formally codified in a proper manifesto or formulated in a solid definition. Auteur is a French word, meaning “author” and the theory reinstates the director as the auteur since he has the complete control over his films and leaves his creative imprint in the style and theme in each of his films. Auteur theory primarily considers director as the ‘author’ of the film.

The auteur critic endeavours to locate the thematic, stylistic consistency, in the entire corpus of a director’s films that give him a recognizably individual and differentiating style in expressing his ‘worldview’ that makes him an auteur. François Truffaut’s article “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” (1954), makes a distinction between the metteurs-en-scène and the auteurs. Metteurs-en-scène are those technicians who mechanically translate a story from one medium to another and do not infuse it with their own worldview. On the other hand, auteurs are those artists who put their signature stamps on the films and their personal vision shines glowingly through his films. In spite of the need for stylistic invisibility, an auteur’s individualistic style proudly declares the uniqueness of the work (Caughie 23). For the fulfillment of the second factor, Alexandre Astruc’s notion of the *caméra-stylo* or “camera-pen,” discussed in “The birth of a new avant-grade: La caméra-stylo,” needs elaboration. Astruc’s theory encourages directors to wield the camera creatively (as writers use pens) through the *mise-en-scène*, and imprint his personal vision on the work, thereby minimizing

the influence of traditional storytelling and curtailing the role of the screenwriter. Astruc demonstrates that “the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the other arts have been before it, and in particular painting and the novel” and prefers to call this new age of cinema the age of *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen) (Graham 11).

So Astruc urges the directors to use their cameras like pens, to express themselves and the deeper meanings embedded in the texts, rather than merely execute a generic translation of texts. Andrew Sarris in his article “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” identifies broadly three areas of competence in directing a film: technical innovation of the director; personal style and mannerisms of the director that grants the film its uniqueness and the hidden meanings that a director adds to his interpretation of a text, giving it a novel dimension. All of these three qualities make a director, an *auteur*, different from technicians.

However, the *Auteur* theory is not free from faults and there are certain arguments regarding the application of *auteur* criticism for film analysis. The primary reason behind criticism of the theory is the collaborative nature of films. Since films are invariably products of effective teamwork with all its correspondent associates like cinematographer, screenplay writer, art director, producer, sound designer, actors etc. contributing to the shaping of the final work, therefore, the primacy of a single person’s vision is dismissed. However, *auteur* criticism does not intend to underestimate team efforts that go into the making of a film but only identifies the director as the subject of study, whose blueprint shines through all his endeavours since he is the master managing the orchestra. Francois Truffaut made the statement, “there are no good or bad films, but only good or bad directors” (45) who takes the help of all associates to translate his vision into the film. The vision and philosophy of the director that is implicitly present in the work, is extracted by *auteur* criticism to expose and explore the human persona behind the filmmaker. Thus each instance of adaptation and appropriation, from text to screen or from text to text, can be treated as original; the director’s and spectator’s added elements and subjective responses and recreations give new meaning and dimensions at every occasion. Hence each film based on Shakespeare should be treated in its own rights,

segregating it from Shakespeare's history and time and receiving it as a whole new work to be assessed from the director's point and time.

Shakespeare in Tollywood: 1961-2024

Bengali film industry has a rich tradition of drawing inspiration from Shakespeare. In a mainstream film *Saptapadi* (1961) directed by Ajay Kar the staging of the beginning of ActV, Sc-II from *Othello* where Othello murders Desdimona was played by Krishnendu Mukherjee and Rina Brown. The memory of the performance of this short section of the scene become so powerfully etched in the mind of the Bengali audience that even a fairly backward audience could speak the lines from *Othello* staged in *Saptapadi*. The character of Krishnendu was played by the star performer of the day, Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, the stellar heroine of her time performed the role of Rina Brown. But none of them delivered Shakespearean dialogues and the dubbing was done by Utpal Dutt and Jennifer Kapoor. This is a classic example of how the performance of a play within the film can add to the text on the screen and create a vibrant experience. Why did Ajay Kar think of including a scene from Shakespeare in English language in a commercial film in Bengali? The scene was neither translated into modern English nor translated in Bengali. The intertextual device through the literary allusiveness underlined the tensions arising out of racial differences and the question of social/cultural identity and its relationship with love. Paramita Chakravarti thinks that the film uses *Othello* as a “paradigm to validate this inter-racial marriage” (Aebische157) between a Bengali Brahmin boy and an Anglo Indian girl. Ajay Kar paved the way for the emergence of Shakespeare in Bengali films in the form of adaptations and appropriations. Ritwik Ghatak's film *Komal Gandhaar* (1961) alludes to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. There are similarities among Shakespeare's Miranda, Kalidas's Shakuntala and Ghatak's Anasuya and in Ghatak's film there are explicit references to both Shakuntala and Ferdinand from *The Tempest*. The theatre group in the film seeks to locate the essence in a performance of *Shakuntala*. Bhriгу makes a comparison between Shakuntala's sorrow in leaving behind the forest and the sorrow arising out of someone's eviction from Kolkata. Miranda can easily depart from the island, but not Anasuya, who through the

conflict of the divided self, must return to her roots. Anasuya compares Bhriku to Samar (Ferdinand) and the Bengali word ‘samar’ means war. The first adaptation of Shakespeare in the Bengali film industry is *Bhranti Bilas* (1963), an adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* and it was directed by Manu Sen. For the first time in the history of Bengali cinema an entire play by Shakespeare was translated and localised. The whole idea of making Shakespeare relevant through the cultural inflections was already initiated by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar who translated Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* as *Bhranti Bilas*. He indigenised the name of the places and the characters. Therefore Ephesus and Syracuse became Hemkut and Jayasthyul and Antipholous brothers were translated as Chiranjeev and Chiranjeet and Dormio became Kinkar. Manu Sen’s credit was to take the translated/adapted version on to the screen. Perhaps the reaching out to the contemporary audiences was made easy by the starring presence of Uttam Kumar in the roles of Chiranjeev and Chiranjeet and Bhanu Bandyopadhyay played the role of Kinkar. Richard Allen opines that this movie uses “the idiom of Indian folk theatre” through “song and dance or choreographed movement” (Kapadia 33). The film does not refer to Shakespeare and only mentions Vidyasagar’s translation as its source. Perhaps the director was anxious about the reception of a complete screen adaptation of Shakespeare in Bengali and therefore acknowledged debt to Vidyasagar omitting Shakespeare’s name.

After *Bhranti Bilas*, an adaption of Shakespeare’s comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* as *Shrimati Bhyankari* was directed by Anjan Banerjee in 2001. This was a highly commercial and melodramatic film that starred Chiranjeet Chakravorty and Satabdi Roy in the lead roles. The film failed to succeed in the box office and could not leave a lasting impression in the mind of the audience. By and large it centred around the idea of ‘taming’ a woman of agency and making her a docile wife appropriate for retaining a staunchly patriarchal social structure.

When Ranjan Ghosh did *Hridmajhare* in 2014, he was aware of the fact that just before a decade a Shakespearean adaptation could not be successful in box office; but in the 1960s mainstream films embraced Shakespeare. So he went back to Othello again and the poster of his

film bears striking similarity to the poster of Saptapadi. The film stars Abir Chatterjee and Raima Sen in the lead roles. For Ghosh Othello becomes Abhijit, a professor of mathematics and Desdimona becomes Debjani who fall in love with each other and Cassio becomes Subhajit, an old friend of Debjani. The film underlines the universal themes of the source text by depicting how jealousy and superstition can be responsible for the downfall of an Indian Professor of Mathematics who is supposed to be logical and rational. Though this film shows Debjani's murder by Abhijit with a sharp hair clip in a fit of anger, here Abhijit does not die like Othello in Shakespeare. Ghosh makes Abhijit guilty of not only murdering Debjani but their own unborn child too. It is true that Abhijit is not killed in the course of the film. Physical death is not everything. He is thrown into a death-in-life existence where each and every moment he gets away from the moorings of everyday life.

Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar* (2015) an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is set in a world of land mafias where love has no value and centre on the eternal saga of the death of lovers caused due to the family feuds. Dev and Rittika Sen played the lead roles and the character of Jissu Sengupta, the chief anatomist of the play was modelled on Tybalt character in the original. The film limns the contemporary economic, political and religious states of Bengal. The tragic fate of the love Ranajoy and Zulekha is not merely similar to *Romeo and Juliet* but also a cultural testament of Bengal where the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims has created violence and bloodshed and caused death of innumerable budding lives. An early modern text has been made conducive to contemporary articulations through the depiction of the Hindu Muslim rivalry and the problems triggered by the land mafias.

In 2016 two Bengali films were produced appropriating Shakespeare. The first one is *Hemanta* directed by Anjan Dutt in August 2016 based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Paramabrata Chatterjee played the lead role-Hemanta. The narrative portrays not only jealousy and betrayal but also some significant present day issues like same-sex desire, drug addiction and competition between Bollywood and Tollywood. The film is set in a time when Bengali film industry was undergoing a phase of crisis. Many critics think that in his attempt to remain faithful to the source

text and the over attempts to remind the audience that this is ultimately ‘Shakespearean’ Dutt lost deeper cinematic aesthetics. Dutt perhaps became very conscious of translating his personal take on *Hamlet*. The competitiveness between Bollywood and Tollywood is not merely geared towards providing cotemporary relevance. He did not like Vishaal Bhardwaj’s Hindi appropriation of Hamlet as Haider in the context of Kashmir. In an article titled “Where is the Tragedy of Hamlet” published in the *Telegraph* on October 15, 2015, he stated the director “killed my huge expectations with *Haider*”.

The master stroke of 2016 was given by the director Srijit Mukherjee in *Zulfiqar*. It is not an appropriation of a single text but concoction of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Antonio and Cleopatra*. Two different plays are brought together in a single narrative in modern context radically repositioning both the texts. In this film Prosenjit Chatterjee, Jisshu Sengupta, Parambrata Chatterjee, Dev, Ankush, Rahul, Nusrat Jahan appeared in pivotal roles. In *Zulfiqar*, the city of Rome is replaced with the politics of dock area of Kolkata, the Senate is substituted by Syndicate and the members of the syndicate are involved in smuggling, dealing in illegal estate and other criminal activities. The members live in an egalitarian society where any attempt to gain more name and fame can lead to murder. This is what led Zulfiqar’s death and the role is played by Prosenjit Chatterjee. Kashinath (Shakespeare’s Cassius) who is an illegal promoter turns the syndicate against Zulfiqar and plans to murder him. Shakespeare’s Brutus becomes Bashir Khan for Mukherjee and he joined hand in glove in the conspiracy of murder and finally pulls the trigger that kills Zulfiqar. Zulfiqar’s faithful friends, Marcus and Tony, along with Laltu takes the revenge of his death along with Akhtar (Shakespeare’s Octavius), Zulfiqar’s nephew. Annihilating the structure of the syndicate, Akhtar takes the position of Zulfiqar and becomes a dictator. Mukherjee has presented a dissection of Mark Antony’s character—the romantic Marcus and the clever Tony. He differentiates between Mark Antony, a scheming soldier in *Julius Caesar* and a hopeless romantic in *Antonio and Cleopatra*. Antony is split into two characters depicted by two different actors, Parambrata, who plays Antony, and Dev who plays Marcus. Cleopatra, played by Nusrat Jehan has rendered an attractive

screen presence but lacks the sexual chemistry. The film clearly depicts the backdrop of the minority community in Kolkata. The continuous intertextuality of the narrative radically alters notions of originality, authorship and the meaning and the role of the director and audience.

The Srijit Mukherjee's film becomes an interesting site to see how a director becomes auteur. Anirban Bhattacharya and Pratik Dutta also made an appropriation of *Macbeth* in a crime thriller titled *Mandaar* in 2021. The same radical transformation of the original text can also be seen in *Mayaa* (2023), a thriller written and directed by Raajorshee De. It is by and large an appropriation of *Macbeth*. Athhoi is 2024 Bengali film directed by Arna Mukhopadhyay appropriating Shakespeare's *Othello* starring Anirban Bhattacharya, Arna Mukhopadhyay and Sohini Sarkar in lead roles.

Conclusion:

So all the Bengali versions are recognized in their own rights, not merely as adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, leading thus to the 'auteur theory' where the filmmakers become the 'authors' of their own productions. Bengali audience enjoyed an original short scene from *Othello* through the iconic presence of Uttam Kumar and the dubbing of Utpal Dutt in 1961 and in 2024 an appropriation of *Othello* is being equally enjoyed by the Bengali audience attesting the enduring legacy of Shakespeare. The film makers often engage in re-appropriations of the Shakespearean texts rather than searching for a new play. All Shakespearean adaptations did not receive equal critical acclaim. The problem arises with the reinterpretations of the same plays time and again; *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* become an automatic choice for the directors. Though there are several versions of *Macbeth*, none has appropriated *Richard II* for Bengali film. The peregrinations of Shakespeare from page to stage is more varied in nature in comparison to that of page screen. *The Merchant of Venice* as *Bhanumati Chittabilas* (1853), *Cymbeline* as *Kusumkumari*. *The Tempest* as *Jhanjha* or *Kujjhatika*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as *Choitali Rater Swapna* witnessed huge stage success in Bengali theatre but there is no Bengali cinematic appropriation of these plays. Tollywood directors should search for the plays that have not at all any cinematic appropriation in Bengali.

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**Stage and Page: Moral Instructions and Character
Formation in Richard Steele's
The Conscious Lovers and *The Tatler***

Richa Gupta

Abstract:

The eighteenth century marked a vibrant period of literary innovation, characterized by the rise of diverse genres. While the novel emerged as the dominant form, other influential yet often underappreciated genres such as the periodical essay and sentimental comedy also contributed significantly to the cultural and moral discourse of the era. Situating itself within this rich literary tapestry, this paper deals with the interplay between stage and page in Richard Steele's dual ventures: his periodical essays *The Tatler* and his sentimental comedy *The Conscious Lovers* to examine how both forms serve as vehicles for moral instruction and character formation. The study begins with situating Steele's works within the reformatory milieu of early 18th-century Britain, to then argue that his works collectively reflect a project of ethical reform aligned with the values of an emerging bourgeois public. While *The Tatler* constructs moral exemplars through its essayistic persona and fictionalized anecdotes, *The Conscious Lovers* stages similar ideals in dramatic form, presenting characters whose emotional self-regulation and social decorum align with contemporary models of virtuous civility. By comparing the rhetorical and performative strategies Steele employs across these two genres, this paper demonstrates how his writing contributes to the construction of middle-class morality, not only as a private ideal but as a public performance of character. In doing so, it highlights Steele's role

in shaping both literary character and social character during a formative period in English theatre and print culture.

Keywords: *The Tatler*, *The Conscious Lovers*, Manners, Morality, the Gentleman.

The eighteenth century in English literature witnessed an explosion of diverse print forms that included novels, newspapers, magazines, travelogues, chapbooks, and periodicals. Among the many writers of this vibrant era, Richard Steele stands out for his pioneering role in developing the periodical essays, most notably through *The Tatler* (1709–1711). In addition to his contributions as an essayist, Steele also gained recognition as a dramatist with works such as *The Funeral* (1701), *The Lying Lover* (1703), *The Tender Husband* (1705) and *The Conscious Lovers* (1722). Writing in the aftermath of the morally lax Restoration period, Steele infused his works with a strong emphasis on virtue and moral rectitude. *The Tatler* advances these ideals through its use of an essayistic persona and fictionalized moral anecdotes, while *The Conscious Lovers* dramatizes similar themes through characters who embody emotional self-regulation and social decorum—key attributes of eighteenth-century models of gentlemanliness. This paper examines the rhetorical and performative strategies that Steele employs across these two genres—periodical and dramatic—to argue that his work plays a crucial role in articulating and disseminating middle-class morality. In doing so, it reveals Steele’s influence in shaping both literary and social conceptions of character during a formative moment in English print and theatrical culture.

For Steele, starting a venture based on correcting morals and errant behaviour came across as something riding with contemporary passion of the people. The prevalence of English society’s quest for improvement had begun over the course of a century as a result of significant political, social, and religious upheavals¹. The urging desire for improvement was rampant primarily because of two reasons—the Restoration dramas and the rise of a new-class of people. The literature that emerged in the aftermath of the Puritan regime was marked by themes of immorality, sexual liberty, and indulgence, a spirit of excess that found vivid expression in Restoration comedies. Plays such as William Wycherley’s *The Country*

Wife (1675), George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), and George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707) are some examples of plays that epitomized this trend. Characterized by libertine protagonists, bawdy humor, and the glorification of adulterous escapades, these works reflected a cultural reaction against earlier moral restraints and embraced a tone of playful, often provocative irreverence. However, at the beginning of seventeenth century there emerged a prevailing sentiment among the English populace that consciously wanted to counteract this decadence of the stage and which wanted to explore means of reinforcing and regulating moral standards and societal conduct. In fact, Jeremy Collier's "Short view of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage" published in 1698, signaled similar sentiments expressing the public opposition to the real or fancied improprieties of plays staged during the previous three decades. In congruence with this, several other efforts were visibly made which included establishing organizations such as the "Society for the Reformation of Manners", an organisation supported by royal endorsement and aristocratic backing and whose aim was identifying transgressors in order to regulate behaviour and channel righteous fervour against prevalent vices. Similarly, several contemporary philosophers through their works also underscored similar need for improvements. Subsequently, John Locke's "Some Thoughts Concerning Education" (1693) advocated to instill virtue, wisdom, and good manners even before book learning and Jonathan Swift, in his "A Project for the Advancement of Religion, and the Reformation of Manners" (1709) advocated for censorship and other authoritative reforms.

Thus, there was a widespread and deeply felt desire followed by some attempts for moral and social improvement across English society. Another key factor that fueled these aspiration of redemption was the significant cultural shift brought about by the rise of a new class of wealthy individuals emerging toward the end of the seventeenth century. Their growing social influence created fertile ground for the promotion of refinement, civility, and moral instruction as markers of status and respectability. The need for a cultural project aimed at refining manners and instilling moral values was in correspondence with the needs and aspirations of this burgeoning bourgeois. This class of people were

becoming affluent not through traditional landownership, but through trade, government stocks, manufacturing, and overseas ventures. This rising non-landed elite sought not only economic power but also cultural legitimacy and social recognition. Concurrently, this expanding class of people (later called the bourgeois or middle class) became closely aligned with a escalating movement for moral reform (Goring 24-29) enabling a fervour for rectifying scruples and wayward conduct widespread. These aspiration for respectability and refinement were reflected not only in formal institutions stated earlier but were also seen in the growing influence of print culture. The print media in its various manifestation sought to curb profanity, sexual immorality, and vice—marking a broader cultural turn toward civility, propriety, and self-discipline.

Considering the social milieu, it becomes evident that Steele recognized an opportunity to encash on the riding sentiments of man's improvement by initiating a cultural-literary project fashioned on those lines. The result was the launching of *The Tatler*, a periodical essay in March 1709. In the "Dedication"² prefixed to a volume of *The Tatler* Steele declared that "The general purpose of this paper is to expose the false arts of life, to pull off the disguises of cunning, vanity, and affectation, and to recommend a general simplicity in our dress, our discourse, and our behaviour" thereby giving "all Men fair Warning to mend their Manners" (Steele, *Tatler* 1). This was an overt declaration foregrounding that the "Lucubrations"³ of *The Tatler* would frequently deal with topics related to reforms. This essay serial became an instant hit with the public for it ran for nearly two years (till January 2011), publishing a total of 273 essays where each essay appeared weekly on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. In *The Tatler* essays, Richard Steele advanced his socio-cultural agenda by presenting vivid character sketches of familiar social types—such as the Pedant, the Beau, the Fop, and the Coquette—exposing their flaws and follies to critique contemporary manners and values. By highlighting their weaknesses, Steele offered an indirect yet pointed critique of the moral shortcomings prevalent in society, using these figures as mirrors through which readers could examine and reassess their own behavior, thus prompting self-reflection and reform. In order to make these essays particularly alluring, Steele made use of

rhetorical devices such as the use of wit. Subsequently, in order to blunt the retort of criticism, he blended humor with ethical purposes so that the essays not only instructed but also amused, thereby gently steering his audience toward civility, good sense, and virtuous conduct. Steele deployed another rhetorical device in the form of a fictitious persona by the name of Isaac Bickerstaff⁴. Creating a specious entity was a clever stratagem that helped Steele navigate the difficult task of mocking the folly without exposing him to public scrutiny. Moreover, the narration of events and the presentation of characters through this persona's view point made for an amusing read because "The idiosyncrasies of Bickerstaff's character provide the humor that sugars the bitter pill of moral censure..." (Italia 23). A brief instance provided from one of *The Tatler* papers will illustrate the blending of these two rhetorical techniques—the persona and wit—deftly. In *The Tatler* No. 163, Bickerstaff satirizes a seventeenth-century category of poets who according to him were more often "verse-monger[s]" than "proper poet[s]". He endeavored the characterization of one such figure by describing his encounter with Ned Softly, a "sonneteer". The old man had been beleaguered by Softly who asked him to stand critic to a "sonnet" he had written. After describing Ned's shortcomings as a reader and a writer, which is a brief bit of criticism but sharp enough to reveal a type, the essayist adroitly demonstrates character-type with the likes of the foolish rhymester mocking his "little Nosegay of Conceits" (Bond 146). The last few lines of the dialogue illustrate the method:

...Dear Sir, said he, grasping me by the Hand, you have a great deal of Patience; but pray what do you think of the next Verse; Your Pen was pluck'd from Cupid's Wing. Think! says I, I think you have made Cupid look like a little Goose. That was my Meaning, says he: I think the Ridicule is well enough hit off. But we now come to the last, which sums up the whole Matter: For Ah! It wounds me like his Dart. Pray how do you like that Ah! Doth it not makes a pretty Figure in that Place? Ah! It looks like I felt the Dart, and cried out at being pricked with it. For Ah! it wounds me like his Dart. My friend Dick Easy, continued he, assured me, he would rather have written that Ah! than to have been the Author of the Aeneid" (Steele, *Tatler* 163).

Here, Ned Softly in spite of being something of a typecast figure is also being shown as a man with his own distinct identity even as he also represents a class viz., a “versemonger”. Using a method which is a combination of straight characterization and the fictional evocation of a scenario of action or a dramatic episode, Bickerstaff sketches the portrait of a foolish type which is something of a stereotype. Instead of saying that a certain kind of poetaster was foolish (the likes of Ned Softly), Bickerstaff exhibited the man in the act of being foolish.

Similarly, more characters were constructed on familiar lines to illustrate other follies. For example, in *The Tatler* Nos. 7 and 14, Richard Steele vividly satirizes a coxcomb, a person who is characterized by excessive vanity, affectation, and superficiality. Steele’s critique of the coxcomb serves his larger aim of reforming public taste and manners by exposing the emptiness of social posturing and advocating for genuine virtue and sincerity. Through humorous yet incisive character sketch, Steele reveals how the coxcomb is consumed by his desire to be admired, particularly by women, but lacks the substance, humility, or intellect that would make him truly worthy of admiration. Similarly, in *Tatler* No. 7, Steele introduces a coxcomb in the figure of Colonel Picket, a man of honour and outward merit who is nevertheless obsessed with his own importance. The Colonel regularly visits a coquette named Florimel, but instead of engaging in meaningful conversation, both characters indulge in vain displays of self-love. Steele notes, “They talk to each other not to be informed, but approved” (Steele, *Tatler* No. 7), suggesting that their entire interaction is performative rather than relational. Colonel Picket is satisfied simply by convincing Florimel that he is “a fine gentleman” while Florimel similarly aims to appear “an accomplished lady and a wit” (Steele, *Tatler* No. 7). This mutual self-display, devoid of genuine emotional exchange, epitomizes the shallowness of the coxcomb’s social world. Steele uses this satirical parallel to mock both genders’ complicity in vanity-driven relationships, while highlighting the coxcomb’s fundamental flaw: a refusal to connect with others beyond the surface. In *Tatler* No. 14, Steele offers a more elaborate and theatrical depiction of the coxcomb through the character of Frank Careless, juxtaposed with Will Nice, a fop. Both are presented as absurd suitors

vying for the attention of a rich widow. Careless is described as one who performs “studied negligence”—deliberately mussing his wig and cravat to seem effortlessly fashionable—while Nice is obsessively precise, constantly adjusting his dress in public. Steele observes that “Careless is a coxcomb, and Nice a fop” (Steele, *Tatler* 14), both ridiculous in their own ways. While Nice is unbearable because of his “laborious exactness” (Steele, *Tatler* 14) Careless is no better, as his affected nonchalance is just as contrived. Steele’s critique lies in the artificiality of both behaviours: the coxcomb’s attempt to appear effortlessly elegant is just another kind of vanity, and equally hollow. What makes the coxcomb especially contemptible, in Steele’s view, is his obsession with outward appearance at the expense of inward virtue. Frank Careless’s superficial charm masks a lack of emotional depth and sincerity. The widow, caught between Careless and Nice, is ironically advised by her maid to choose Tom Terrour, a notorious gamester and seducer. Steele here delivers a biting social commentary: “nothing so much prevails with the vain part of that sex, as the glory of deceiving them who have deceived others” (Steele, *Tatler* 14). This cynical observation underscores how vanity often leads to poor judgment in love, with women admiring not the morally upright but the infamous and fashionable. The coxcomb thrives in such a world, where showmanship is mistaken for substance.

Through these sketches, Steele highlights the frailties of the coxcomb: his narcissism, superficiality, and inability to form authentic connections. Whether it is Colonel Picket bragging about his military exploits to impress a coquette, or Frank Careless intentionally disheveling himself to seem effortlessly elegant, the coxcomb remains trapped in a world of empty appearances. Steele’s satire exposes how such men, despite their confidence and polish, are ultimately insecure and emotionally stunted. His critique aims not just to entertain, but to encourage readers to value sincerity, humility, and emotional intelligence over showy affectation. In doing so, Steele continues his broader project of using the periodical essay to reform the morals and manners of his time. And so, over time, “the character sketches in *The Tatler* generally pertain to exemplifying abstract maxims or claims as well as explicitly mirroring social deficits” (Schön 63), encouraging readers to both identify with and critically assess societal flaws.

In *The Tatler*, Richard Steele not only exposes the faults and follies of various characters through sharp yet humorous portrayals, but also upholds and promotes the virtues that define a true gentleman. His essays serve a dual purpose—criticizing moral lapses while offering positive models of refined conduct. This approach aligned with his broader aim of shaping the cultural values of the emerging bourgeois class, offering them a framework of civility, reason, and decorum to emulate in their rise within society. He rejects superficial markers such as birth, wealth, or profession, and instead grounds gentility in moral character and usefulness to society. Distinctly in *The Tatler* No. 207, he argues that “the courtier, the trader, and the scholar should all have an equal pretension to the denomination of a gentleman” thereby democratizing the title and emphasizing that gentlemanliness lies in conduct, not social rank. For Steele, honesty, humility, and service to others are the essential virtues of a gentleman: “There are no qualities from which we ought to pretend to the esteem of others, but such as render us serviceable to them; for free men have no superiors but benefactors” (Steele, *Tatler* No. 207). Through the contrasting behaviours of his three nephews—a vain courtier, a modest scholar, and a watchful trader—Steele critiques early signs of pride and mutual contempt that arise from different social training. He warns that “prejudices... from the different ways of education... create the most fatal misunderstandings in life” (Steele, *Tatler* No. 207) underscoring his belief that civility, modesty, and mutual respect—not fashion or flattery—are the true marks of a gentleman.

While Steele’s carefully crafted characters in *The Tatler* supported his moral and cultural agenda in print, a parallel effort was undertaken through the medium of drama. In *The Conscious Lovers* staged in 1722, Richard Steele attempts a similar moral and social reformation of English comedy by shifting the focus away from the libertinism and vulgarity of Restoration drama towards the cultivation of virtue, sentiment, and refined manners. Through this sentimental comedy, Steele constructs a dramatic world where characters are rewarded not for clever deceit or amorous conquests, but for their sincerity, integrity, and self-control. A central strategy in this moral reform is Steele’s use of satirical contrast,

most notably between Mr. Cimberton, a pedantic and vain coxcomb, and Bevil Junior, a paragon of gentlemanly virtue. By highlighting Cimberton's absurdities and placing them in opposition to Bevil's calm rationality and moral sensitivity, Steele illustrates his vision of what refined behaviour should look like in both private affection and public life. Cimberton is introduced as a suitor to Lucinda, promoted by her mother solely because of his wealth and noble connections. From the outset, Steele ridicules him as a "formal, philosophical, pedantic coxcomb" (Steele, *Conscious* 299) whose ideas of courtship and marriage are absurdly mechanical and lacking in feeling. He views Lucinda not as a woman with desires and feelings, but as an object to be inspected and acquired, as if she were a commodity. Steele satirizes this dehumanizing perspective when Myrtle complains that Cimberton "will examine the limbs of his mistress with the caution of a jockey, and pays no more compliment to her personal charms than if she were a mere breeding animal" (Steele, *Conscious* 299). This reduction of a romantic relationship to a business transaction or a livestock appraisal exposes Cimberton's spiritual emptiness and comic self-importance. His language is filled with pompous logic and ill-applied philosophical reasoning, which Steele mocks as pretentious and hollow. Cimberton's greatest folly is his inability to connect emotionally—a critical failure in Steele's ethical framework, which values emotional sensitivity as a key component of virtue. His awkward pride, vanity, and social blindness position him as the negative model of masculinity. Even when he is considered a rival to Bevil Jr., his ineptitude makes him more farcical than threatening. Bevil Jr. and Myrtle both dismiss him as someone "with very little judgment" (Steele, *Conscious* 299), showing that Cimberton represents the kind of outdated, unfeeling suitor Steele wants to cast out of the comic tradition.

Steele as contrast to Cimberton, presents ideal of a gentleman through the character of Bevil Jr.—a young fellow who is introspective, emotionally intelligent, and morally upright. Unlike Cimberton, Bevil Jr. is not driven by selfish ambition or vanity. His primary conflict is between filial duty and romantic inclination, as he loves Indiana but refuses to act on this love without his father's consent. His restraint is not born of weakness, but of principle. "I never will marry without my

father's consent," he says, "but give me leave to say too, this declaration does not come up to a promise that I will take whomsoever he pleases" (Steele, *Conscious* 292). This statement reveals the balance he strikes between obedience and personal conscience—both essential traits of a virtuous man in Steele's moral vision. Bevil's Jr. relationship with Indiana further highlights his integrity. Though she is of uncertain parentage and modest means, he treats her with the highest respect, secretly supporting her without seeking any favours in return. He even refuses to confess his love until he can do so honourably, telling Humphrey that he will not speak on the matter until he has his father's consent to speak. This conscious self-restraint contrasts sharply with Cimberton's assumption that a woman is his for the taking once the financial conditions are met. Where Cimberton sees a transaction, Bevil sees a moral bond. Moreover, Steele uses Bevil's dialogues with Indiana to advocate for benevolence and refinement. When Indiana praises him for his selfless generosity, Bevil humbly responds, downplaying his actions: "he who lays out his money in such valuable purchases... what could a man do better with his cash?" (Steele, *Conscious* 311). This exchange illustrates a key element of Steele's reform agenda: that true virtue is modest and internal, not performed for show or social advantage. Bevil's view of charity, love, and duty is consistently rational and humane—qualities that Steele proposes as the antidote to the affectation and vanity represented by Cimberton. Even in public matters, Bevil shows refined behaviour and social grace. He treats his servants with kindness, his rivals with fairness, and his father with deference, never allowing pride or passion to compromise his sense of what is right. Unlike the comic heroes of earlier drama, who win through cunning and bravado, Bevil triumphs precisely because he respects others' autonomy, navigates obligations with reason, and adheres to a moral code. As Calhoun Winton observes that "Steele provides in Bevil Jr. a direct model for emulation, endowing him with the qualities of filial obedience, faithfulness and generosity in love, nobility in friendship, and reasonableness in affairs of honor, all of which were recommended time and again in *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, and *The Guardian*" (Winton 23). Ultimately, through the stark contrast between Cimberton's folly and Bevil's gentlemanly conduct, Steele enacts his reform of comedy and character. He turns the comic stage into a

platform for moral instruction, where ridicule is reserved for pride and vanity, and admiration is directed towards modesty, honour, and sensibility. In doing so, *The Conscious Lovers* becomes not only a sentimental drama but a didactic tool, urging its audience to reassess the values that govern social behaviour and personal relationships. Steele's aim, as demonstrated in the foil between Cimberton and Bevil Jr. is to replace mockery with morality, wit with wisdom, and spectacle with sincerity.

Thus, through *The Tatler* and *The Conscious Lovers* Richard Steele demonstrated how both the printed page and the theatrical stage could function as powerful instruments of moral and social refinement. By working across two distinct mediums of essaysperiodical and the drama, he aimed to elevate the status of literature, using it to critique human vice as well as to promote a refined standard of gentlemanly conduct. While *The Tatler* used satire and anecdote to create vivid character sketches that highlighted societal flaws and promoted a clear moral vision, Steele carried this ethical project into the theatre with *The Conscious Lovers*. There, he dramatized moral transformation by contrasting the vain and superficial Cimberton with the virtuous Bevil Jr., who embodied the emerging ideal of the polite and morally refined gentleman. In both forms, Steele masterfully embedded moral instruction within compelling narratives, proving that literature could be both rhetorically effective and aesthetically rewarding.

Footnotes

1. These changes were explained by R.P. Bond as- "the great schism in Church and State, the growth in dissent and Dissent and the decline in the power of the established Church, the importation of an English king who knew the wicked ways of France, a responsible press fostering understanding and initiative alongside an irresponsible press breeding rumour and error, the expulsion of an anointed monarch, the frequent presence of military views and actions, and the general growth of enlightenment and liberal philosophy. These unsettling forces reached into general attitudes and individual patterns of conduct, often with a regression in personal beliefs and standards, a downward or backward

way in what we call popular philosophy (for the higher attributes) and morals (for the more commonplace occasions of human concerns) (71).

2. This dedication “To Mr. Maynwaring” was originally prefixed to the fourth volume of the collected edition issued in 1710-11 (Aitkens).
3. Steele’s addressed his essays as “The Lucubration’s of Mr. Isaac Bickerstaff Esq.” (*Tatler* No. 1)
4. The name Isaac Bickerstaff was inspired by Jonathan Swifts’ *Predictions for the Year 1708* for which the latter had created the imaginary character of an astrologer named Isaac Bickerstaff (Bond “Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.” 104).

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Performative Patriarchy in Dowry-related Social Practices: A Biopolitical Reading of the Malayalam film *Ponman*

Renjini R

Abstract:

This paper intends to examine the performative aspects of dowry as a deep-rooted social practice in India. Dowry is defined as “any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly” (Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961) by the bride’s parents to the groom and his family before, on or during the marriage. It is a widespread social custom in India and has led to rampant gender discrimination. Girls and women are considered a financial liability by the girl’s family due to the custom as dowry is considered a social obligation. Failure to meet the demands of gifts-money and gold from the groom’s family leads to violence, physical chastisement and deaths of women. The system was legally prohibited in 1961 but continues even today in most brutal forms. The film *Ponman* (2025) deals with a specific dowry-related social practice in Kollam district in Kerala, particularly in the coastal regions called *Panapayattu*. The word literally means *payattu* or fight on *panam*, i. e. money. The custom refers to the practice of arranging a party by the bride’s family a day or a week before the wedding. This is an occasion for the bride’s family to arrange the gold required as dowry. The practice goes that the guests from the locality, neighbours, friends and members of the community contribute money to the bride’s family to buy the customary gold required to be exchanged as dowry to the groom’s family. The film revolves around the tug-of-war between Ajeesh (Basil Joseph), an agent who arranges gold jewellery for poor families and Steffi (Lijomol Jose), a graduate bride in early thirties forced to marry Mariano (Sajin Gopu), a hard-working,

unschooled, watchman of a shrimp farm. The paper examines how society manages and controls female bodies in order to regulate female subjectivity, using the film as a cultural text.

Introduction

Biopolitics is a mode of power that constructs and renders whole human populations as subjective through a range of measures from statistical data, health promotion and immigration controls. The concept was advanced by Michel Foucault in his 1976 work, *The History of Sexuality* (Joseph Campbell and Adam Sitze 4). Foucault applied the concept of biopolitics to examine the construction of power in western societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through constructing knowledge and managing populations through such means as census and data collection, the state brought human bodies under the control of government intervention (Alexander J. Means 1968).

Dowry is a common social practice in India which refers to the economic transactions between the bride and groom's family, including cash, property, gold and gifts as such on the occasion of marriage. According to K. Neelapushpam, the custom of dowry is most common in patrilineal and patrilocal cultures. The bride is expected to stay with or nearby the groom's family, serving the family's interests in such cultures (33).

Performative Patriarchy in Dowry

K. Neelapushpam, offering a comprehensive analysis of the dowry system in India, argues that dowry is a kind of conjugal fund, ensuring financial security in widowhood, or against a negligent husband, or eventually providing for her children. It may also help to establish a marital household (33). In theory, dowry may seem to be a support for women, however in practice, the very system contributes to pejorative attitudes towards women.

A major cause for dowry system may be the patriarchal system of inheritance. In patriarchal cultures, inheritance of property is from father to son, leaving women dependent upon husbands and in-laws. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 recognised equal inheritance rights to

sons and daughters among Hindu, Sikh and Jain families; while its Muslim citizens are under the sharia laws. A turning point in the history of Indian law is the petition filed by Mrs. Mary Roy, against her brother, George Issac. Mary Roy, a Syrian Christian woman was denied the right to inherit her family property under the Travancore Succession Act, 1916. Daughters in Christian families in the former princely state of Travancore were only entitled to one-fourth of the son's share or Rs. 5000. This entitlement was void if dowry had been provided or promised to the daughter by the intestate (Sakshi Kuthari, "Mary Roy"). A landmark verdict by the Supreme Court in 1986, declared the Travancore Christian Succession as void and the Indian Succession Act of 1925 as legally binding to questions of inheritance in Christian families (Kuthari).

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 legally terminated the practice as it was identified as one of the root causes of gender discrimination. The Act stipulates a penalty of imprisonment and fine if a person is found guilty of giving or receiving dowry. Girls and women are considered a financial liability by the girl's family due to the custom as dowry is considered a social obligation. Failure to meet the demands of gifts-money and gold from the groom's family leads to violence, physical torture and deaths of women. Despite the prohibition, the system continues even today in most brutal forms. Neither the new inheritance laws nor the dowry prohibition act has brought an effective check to dowry. The above discussions make it obvious that dowry plays an immense role in controlling female subjectivity. Inability to pay adequate dowries, prevent many women from finding suitable partners. The demand for huge dowries makes many parents neglect the education of daughters. Combined with widespread son-preference, the system contributes to female foeticide, sex selective abortions and female infanticide.

The paper examines how society manages and controls female bodies in order to regulate female subjectivity, using the 2025 Malayalam film *Ponman* as a cultural text. The film *Ponman* (2025) deals with a specific dowry-related social practice in Kollam district in Kerala, particularly in the coastal regions called *Panapayattu*. The word literally means *payattu* or fight on *panam*, i. e. money. The custom refers to the practice of arranging a party by the bride's family a day or a week before the

wedding. This is an occasion for the bride's family to arrange the gold required as dowry. The practice goes that the guests from the locality, neighbours, friends and members of the community contribute money to the bride's family to buy the customary gold required to be exchanged as dowry to the groom's family.

Kerala is known for its high literacy, and high standards of living. Despite its many commendable achievements, it ranks high in dowry deaths, with Kollam holding one of the worst ranks. A prominent factor in most dowry cases is the demand for gold. Gold occupies a lot of prominence in Indian weddings. P.P. Ajayakumar's article, "All that Glitters: Gold and the Indian Imaginary" analyses the visual appeal of advertisements of gold jewellery to "perpetuate its worth and fix its relevance in our day to day life". He also discusses the popular jingle of Bhima jewellery, a well-known jewellery chain in Kerala, "Pennayal ponnu vennam" as an example. Through repeated associations the Indian imaginary of wedding is always associated with gold:

The image of a bride fully decorated in gold is a constructed one which has been engraved in the mind through constant practice and performance though it appears to be natural. The lines referred above that connects woman's identity with that of gold does not originate in the imagination of a man/woman but is imprinted in our social imaginary through recurring performance (19).

The jingle "Pennayal ponnu venam" suggests that if one is a woman, she should have gold. It is gold which makes a woman attractive, therefore desirable. Many such advertisements of some popular jewellery brands in Kerala drive home the same point- commodification of woman through associating her with gold.

Hence it could be argued that dowry system is a form of biopower. It employs a range of techniques including social consensus, son-preference, gender roles etc to control female subjectivity. In India, daughters are considered as 'parayadhan' or other's property and 'kanyadan', literally meaning gifting a virgin daughter, is regarded the sacred duty of a father.

The film discusses the practice of *panapayattu* among the Latin

Catholic community among the coastal regions of Kollam. Steffi, a graduate bride in her early thirties is forced to marry Mariano, an illiterate watchman of a shrimp farm. The marriage is fixed when Steffi's mother agrees to the demand of 25 sovereign gold from Mariano's mother. The family had seen better times in the past when Steffi's father owned a boat. With the death of the father, the family becomes poor while Steffi's brother, Bruno is a die-hard member of communist party. The plans to collect money before the wedding goes awry when Bruno gets expelled from the church and the party when he beats up the local parish clerk. Ajeesh, an agent who arranges gold jewellery for poor families provides the gold. The collected money only pays for 13 sovereigns when Ajeesh demands the family to return the 12 sovereigns. Steffi however goes to her in-laws with the gold, landing Ajeesh in trouble with his boss, the owner of a jewellery syndicate. Ajeesh follows Steffi to Thalavettichira, literally meaning Head Slayer Island, ignoring Bruno's warnings. Mariano refuses to return the gold invoking his younger sister's marriage and the need to settle the debt on his elder sister's marriage. Mariano even stabs Ajeesh. In the climactic fight, Ajeesh sneaks into Mariano's shrimp farm, threatening to open the floodgates and release all the shrimp to the water- destroying his livelihood. In the struggle, Ajeesh traps Mariano's hand in heavy machinery, and retrieves the gold. Steffi refuses to return to Mariano's household as she is well aware that she has no value there without the gold. The compatibility between Steffi and Mariano is low and Mariano is sexually abusive. As Ajeesh and Steffi sail away in a boat, he tells her: "You are perfect without gold". This comes surprisingly, from a man whose mobile ringtone is set to Bhima jewellery's advertisement jingle: "*Pennayal ponnu venam*". The climax shows Steffi's decision to survive in a society obsessed with gold without gold. Through a transformative journey, she realises the power of education, while Ajeesh realises his part in sustaining an abusive system.

The film highlights the deeper injustices in dowry system. Steffi is a graduate from a community where girls are hardly given any education. The Latin Catholic community comprises mostly of fishermen while women sell fish. An illiterate yet wealthy Mariano is forced upon Steffi

as she finds her educational qualification an obstacle in finding a suitable alliance. Mariano is a hardworking man burdened with the responsibility of his sisters. Ajeesh comes from an extremely poor family and needs to support an aging mother and sister who work in a construction site. Ajeesh, however is a man of integrity whose sincerity has earned the trust of jewellery owners. Bruno stands in contrast to Mariano and Ajeesh. He does not have any job and is interested only in politics. The mothers in both families also serve as foils to each other. Steffi's mother even asks Bruno to kill Ajeesh if need arises, to keep him away from Mariano's family. Mariano's mother accuses Steffi and holds Mariano responsible for providing the dowry for his sisters. Bruno fails to support his family and also upsets the community, causing the ostracism. Steffi gifts one sovereign to Mariano's sister and returns the rest to Ajeesh. The film shows how the society supports an evil practice keeping women under check. Women hardly receive any education making them dependent on the family, father or brother for economic support.

Christian women in Kerala had to lead a legal battle to win inheritance rights to the property of the native family. The Travancore Succession Act had maintained that daughters do not have any share in familial property if they were provided with or promised with dowry by the intestate. It is in this context that local practices such as *panapayattu* becomes problematic. The whole community is involved in gathering money for the gold exchanged during wedding. The girl does not get any chance to have a say in most cases. Her interests or choices are not taken into consideration. When Bruno's mother comes to know about the debt to Ajeesh, she comments that gold is more important than the girl. Women often find themselves trapped in abusive marriages with no means to escape. Divorces are mostly looked down upon leaving women helpless. Dowry as a form of biopower has such enormous impact on society that material wealth like gold is prioritised over human lives. No legal measures are enough to destroy the custom of dowry. Unless and until the root cause of gender discrimination is addressed, the system will not change. Economic empowerment of women is the most important step in addressing gender discrimination.

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Decoding Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*: A Feminist Reading

Sonia Ningthoujam

Abstract

Kalidasa, the Classical Sanskrit writer, often considered ancient India's greatest poet and dramatist has been admired and revered over the ages. His *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (The Recognition of Sakuntala) was translated into English by Sir William James in 1789, making it the first Indian drama to be rendered into a Western language and made known and accessible to other parts of the world. The play is admired for its lush lyricism and portrayal of love, separation and reunion of king Dushyanta and the beautiful Sakuntala. Over the ages, this play has been examined and constructed by readers and interpreters in their own specific historical and cultural contexts and often aestheticized, neglecting the issues of gender hierarchies deeply embedded in the story.

In the light of this back drop, the paper offers a feminist re-reading of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* to examine how the drama stages the silencing, marginalization and conditional recognition of the heroine.

The paper will delve into the character of Sakuntala and how she embodies the vulnerability of being born a woman in a patriarchal social set up and bears the agony and pain with stoic indifference till she was recognized and reunited with Dushyanta. Sakuntala's fate was determined entirely by patriarchal legitimacy and her dignity depended solely on male recognition. Therefore, a feminist reading becomes essential, even though it will naturally subvert the traditional romantic interpretation of the play and bring into the forefront some core social issues such as gender, voice and recognition in ancient literature.

Keywords: Sakuntala, Feminist, Society, Gender, Recognition.

Introduction

Kalidasa's drama, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* occupies a central place in the canon of Sanskrit poetry (Kavya), admired for its refined aesthetics and exploration of love and loss. It also happens to be the first Indian drama to be translated into a Western Language. Ever since Sir William Jones's 1789 translation, the play has shaped European Romanticism and served as a symbol of India's classical heritage (Thapar, 1999). In the next 100 years, there were at least 46 translations of the play in 12 European languages (Wikipedia). The great German poet, Goethe was very much enamoured after reading the play that he published an epigram in 1791 about Sakuntala and is said to have a lifelong admiration and appreciation for Sakuntala. The play is seen as a poetic masterpiece epitomizing love, beauty and romance of king Dushyanta and the beautiful Sakuntala.

Yet, this romanticized presentation and reception obscures the play's gender politics. In essence *Abhijnanasakuntalam* dramatizes the vulnerability of women within patriarchal systems of recognition. Sakuntala, despite being an embodiment of purity, beauty, feminine charm and ideal womanhood, is silenced, discredited and only conditionally reinstated through king Dushyanta's recovery of his lost memory. Her predicament illustrates what Gayatri Spivak terms "epistemic violence": the structural disqualification of female speech with male-centered frameworks of authority. (Spivak, 1988). From feminist perspective, the play dramatizes both the subordination and endurance of women, as Sakuntala's character is controlled and dictated by male recognition. This paper offers a feminist reading of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* delving into how the heroine is simultaneously idealized and marginalised by a social structure that thrives on male dominance. The play reveals both the heroine's resilience at the same time removal of female subjectivity in classical literature.

Sakuntala as The Ideal Indian Woman

Kalidasa has portrayed Sakuntala as an ethereal beauty. She has inherited this beauty from her nymph mother Menaka. King Dushyanta falls in love with her at the very first sight. Her exquisite beauty makes

him unable to control his desires. He praises her beauty in the woods that she appears to be quite a different creation of the jewel of mankind.

Kalidasa has presented Sakuntala as a duty bound daughter and as well aware of social prohibitions. She loves her family and takes care of her parents' honour. Though she loves Dushyanta and gives herself to him, yet she does not go with him in the absence of her parents. She is portrayed as typical Indian woman. She is bold as well as shy at the same time. She tries to come close to the king but does not reveal her feelings (Pankaj Solanki, 2019). She is so shy that she cannot look straight into Dushyanta's eyes. He describes her position thus:

"Even though she makes no response to my words she is all ears whenever I speak; it is true she faces me not, but then what other objects do her eyes ever seek."

(Rajan, 1999)

In a number of instances in the play Sakuntala becomes the image of Indian women in ancient Indian society, which was steeped in patriarchy. In this society women have always been treated as a subordinate to men. Sakuntala was taught by her father Sage Kanva, that it was a woman's duty to be a faithful wife, a dutiful daughter-in-law and a woman who silently bears every wrong doing of her husband or his family. Such women are said to be the ideal mistress of every home. Kanva tells Sakuntala as she prepares to leave for Dushyanta's palace:

"My child, you are now leaving for your husband's home; when you enter it: Serve your elders with diligence; to be a friend to your co-wives; even if wronged by your husband do not cross him through anger; treat those who serve you with utmost courtesy; be not puffed up with pride by wealth or pleasures; Thus do girls attain the status of mistress of the home; those who act contrary are the bane of their families."

(Rajan, 1999).

A woman's subservient role is presented to the full in the dialogues of the main characters in the drama. It is painful to see, as the story

progresses, king Dushyanta denies recognising Sakuntala due to sage Durvasa's curse, making him forget Sakuntala completely. Sakuntala wanted to return to her father's ashram but she was not allowed to go back home by her own people who had come along with her at the king's palace. Later with no place to go she prayed to Mother Earth to take her in. Miraculously she was snatched by a celestial light and taken to heaven, where she gave birth to her son Sarvadamana (Bharata). Sakuntala was reunited with king Dushyanta after he regain his memory of Sakuntala. She cried tears of joy as the king recognised her and asked for her forgiveness. She had no complain on her part for all the shame and suffering she endured because of the king's failure to recognise her. Her patience and silent suffering was thus exalted, glorified and idealized as the true virtues of the Indian woman. But behind this glorious façade lies the mask of disempowerment. As Irigaray argues that, the symbolic elevation of women often serves to contain them within roles defined by patriarchal desire. (Irigaray, 1985).

Patriarchal Structures of Recognition

The court scene epitomizes patriarchal logic. King Dushyanta flatly declines his marriage to Sakuntala as he said:

"...I cannot recall to my mind accepting the hand of this lady in marriage at any time. Seeing that she is plainly pregnant, how can I receive her when I have doubts about being the husband?"

(Rajan, 1999)

No matter how much Sakuntala tries to make the king remember their union in the forest, he remains adamant in his claim that he doesn't know her. Ultimately, Sakuntala out of shame and immeasurable heart break, weeping incessantly calls out to mother Earth and says:

"O Gracious mother Earth, open wide and take me in"

(Rajan, p.242)

Here, the asymmetry is stark. Her testimony carries no weight or validity and the final decision that is the legitimacy of her claim depends entirely on the king's recognition. This text connects Sakuntala to the

critic Gayatri Spivak. It states that Sakuntala “speaks” but her words are structurally invalidated by the patriarchal system (Spivak, 1988). Spivak in her influential essay, “Can the Subaltern speak?” argues that the “Subaltern” (the marginalised or the oppressed groups) are often silenced because the power structures in place make their voices unintelligible or unable to be heard. Sakuntala’s struggle for recognition relates to this theory.

Reunion and Dependence

The reunion of Sakuntala with king Dushyanta comes through recognition by memory, upon seeing the lost ring he had given her at the time of his departure from the hermitage. Sakuntala’s recognition came not from her own testimony but through the king’s recollection which was mediated by divine intervention. The ending is thus highly ambiguous. It restores familial unity but re-establishes dependence upon male authority. The audience’s sympathy lies with Sakuntala, whose moral superiority is never questioned. Yet, her authority remains conditional and her recognition deferred until the king bestows it. Throughout the play, she is praised in terms of her beauty and duty (Pankaj, Solanki, 2019). By the end of the play, Sakuntala is idealised and becomes the epitome of humility, beauty, sacrifice, and faithfulness which is the ultimate image of the traditional Indian woman.

Conclusion

A feminist reading of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* reveals it as a play not only of love and romance but also of silencing, marginalization and conditional recognition. Sakuntala is idealized yet disempowered, silenced and restored to dignity only through the king’s memory.

The play becomes a good case of both violence and resilience of feminine subjectivity in Indian classical literature. It also depicts patriarchal authority by exposing the injustices, at the same time reinscribes the heroine into the towering authority. This ambivalence is central to its feminist significance as *Abhijnanasakuntalam* neither wholly oppresses nor empowers Sakuntala but dramatizes the contradictions of her position.

Therefore, examining the play within feminist literary studies brings

challenges to the aestheticized, romantic meanings and reveal, the value of applying feminist and postcolonial frameworks to classical texts. In doing so, it will accentuate ancient Indian literature and bring to the forefront enduring questions of gender, voice and recognition. Sakuntala remains an intense and deeply revered figure through whom the politics of silence, legitimacy and resilience continue to resonate and will remain forever an enigma of Indian womanhood in the eyes of feminists who thrives for equality of the sexes in all fields.

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Vemular Ramayana: An Analysis of Caste and Knowledge Continuity in Modern India

Swati Roy Chowdhury

Abstract

Anshuman Kar's *Vemular Ramayana* is a profound contemporary political play that constructs a rigorous critique of the temporal continuity of caste-based structural violence in modern India. This essay asserts that the work's political and structural power resides primarily in its textual dramaturgy, which is defined by the deliberate and complex manipulation of narrative time. This manipulation, read directly from the dramatic script, forces the audience to confront the unbroken, immutable logic of exclusion. This analysis, therefore, makes a formal and exhaustive textual reading of the script, entirely separate from its performative or staging aspects, treating the document as a self-contained literary artifact. The play employs a precise and devastating dual narrative strategy: the juxtaposition of the ancient mythological execution of the Shudra ascetic Shambuka, as chronicled in the *Uttara Kanda* of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, with the documentary accounts and final institutional suicide of the Dalit research scholar, Rohit Vemula, in 2016.

Drawing on Keir Elam's semiotic analysis, which posits that the dramatic text itself is a system of "signification that structures itself around the virtuality of performance" (Elam 19), this paper focuses on the script's internal architecture, where the virtuality of the *action* is entirely driven by its temporal logic. Further, utilizing Gérard Genette's concept of *narrative anachronies*, the analysis demonstrates how the play uses analepsis (flashback) to invoke the Shambuka episode, and prolepsis (flashfront) to anticipate the systematic, pre-written failure of the modern state to protect its subaltern citizens.

By applying Mikhail Bakhtin's influential theory of the *chronotope*, the essay argues that the play effectively collapses mythological time and modern bureaucratic time into a single, terrifyingly consistent Chronotope of Caste, thereby demonstrating that the prohibition of spiritual *tapasya* (ascetic practice) in the *Treta Yuga* is structurally and ethically homologous to the prohibition of institutional scholarship in a supposedly democratic, secular India.

This argument, further substantiated by B.R. Ambedkar's fundamental critique of caste maintenance and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question on subaltern enunciation, reveals how Kar's dramatic text functions as a powerful, necessary counter-archive that deconstructs the moral and political authority historically granted to the Hindu epic tradition. The final conclusion maintains that the play's genius lies in its textual assertion that the system is not failing accidentally, but rather succeeding structurally, as designed.

Keywords: Textual Dramaturgy, Analepsis, Prolepsis, Chronotope, B.R. Ambedkar, Intertextuality, Structural Violence, Dalit Literature, Institutional Caste.

The *Ramayana* is understood not as a singular, monolithic narrative but as a "sea of stories," a vast repository subject to endless acts of revision, interpretation, and, critically, political usage across South Asia. Anshuman Kar's *Vemular Ramayana* engages this literary fluidity not through conventional retelling or adaptation, but through a radical act of textual synthesis and inversion. While the work is fundamentally conceived and designed for the stage, this analysis focuses exclusively on the published dramatic script, treating the play as a fixed literary artefact whose political argument is encoded and executed entirely within its formal dramaturgy and narrative structure, irrespective of any directorial or acting choices.

Keir Elam, in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, provides the essential framework for this textual approach by distinguishing between the semiotics of performance—the ephemeral act of staging—and the semiotics of the dramatic text itself, emphasizing that the latter involves

the “complex rules and strategies” of its internal organization (Elam 19). In Kar’s script, these strategies are meticulously deployed to collapse the vast chronological distance between two discrete acts of violence—the ritualistic beheading of Shambuka (the Ancient Archive) and the institutional death of Rohit Vemula (the Modern Archive)—into a terrifyingly unified narrative space. This textual strategy immediately asserts that the violence described in the ancient epic serves not as a historical antecedent, but as the foundational blueprint for the systematic, structural violence enacted within the modern political and educational system. By treating time not as a linear progression toward modernity and equality, but as a site of cyclical, repetitive, and deliberate oppression, Kar’s work compels the reader to confront the unbroken chain of caste logic spanning millennia.

This essay will apply formal theoretical lenses of narrative time and intertextual theory to demonstrate how this structural collapse constitutes the very crux of the play’s political problem: the permanence of caste exclusion in Indian institutional life, a phenomenon that sociologist Satish Deshpande refers to when discussing the insidious nature of caste in modern democratic settings. Deshpande notes that caste continues to function not as a relic, but as an active, embedded structural logic of inequality within purportedly neutral institutions, making the university a prime site for its reproduction, precisely as depicted in the play (Deshpande 45). The play’s political efficacy, therefore, rests on its success in formally proving the identical *logic* underpinning the mythological decree and the bureaucratic file.

The theoretical commitment to textual dramaturgy is essential because it anchors the play’s political reading in its formal choices, not its interpretation in performance. Elam’s theory allows the critic to treat the dramatic script as a specialized form of narrative whose meaning is derived from its unique set of conventions, such as the use of dialogue, character list, scene divisions, and—most importantly for *Vemular Ramayana*—the articulation of temporal shifts through textually implied stage directions or verbal cues. In this script, the shift between Shambuka’s forest and Vemula’s hostel room is not a simple scene change; it is a radical juxtaposition enforced by the writer’s pen, signaling

an equivalence between the spaces. The political argument thus resides in the dialogic space created by the writer between the court of Rama and the modern university administration, demonstrating that their language, their justification, and their final verdict are identical. The absence of traditional dramatic unity (unity of time, place, and action) is precisely the source of the play's power, allowing the Chronotope of Caste to become the *de facto* unity, asserting that the only stable element across time is the perpetuation of hierarchy. This textual choice prevents any easy emotional catharsis and instead demands an intellectual recognition of systemic, unchanging violence. The script becomes a documentary-archive itself, using the raw textual evidence of both mythological text (quotations from the *Uttara Kanda*) and bureaucratic documents (implied suspension orders, the suicide note) to construct its case. This dual documentation is a foundational act of textual activism, positioning the script as a piece of literary evidence rather than mere fiction.

The central technical device that facilitates this temporal collapse and structural linkage in *Vemular Ramayana* is the dynamic, insistent, and non-linear deployment of time, a formal narrative technique defined by Gérard Genette as *anachrony* (temporal discordance) in his seminal work, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. These narrative anachronies manifest in the play's script as recurrent, structurally necessary analepsis (flashback) and pervasive, predictive prolepsis (flashfront). The Shambuka episode, which is located in the oft-controversial *Uttara Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, is presented in the play not as a tangential myth but as a constant, dominating analepsis. It is the historical/mythological flashback that establishes the structural blueprint of the caste mechanism. The narrative premise—a Brahmin boy's premature death is attributed to the transgression of *dharma* by a Shudra ascetic (Shambuka) performing forbidden *tapasya*—serves not as ancient history, but as an ever-present cause in the dramatic timeline. Genette defines analepsis as “any narrative movement backward” (Genette 48), specifying that it can either be *homodiegetic* (involving the main characters) or *heterodiegetic* (introducing material from an entirely different chronological line).

Kar's use is structurally heterodiegetic yet ideologically homodiegetic,

as the play continuously demonstrates that Shambuka and Vemula are participants in the same single, eternal caste narrative. This analepsis, the scene of the divine execution, is not a mere background detail; it is the legalistic and textual foundation upon which the modern institutional crisis is built. By meticulously detailing Rama's methodical search for the transgression and his subsequent lethal correction, the play uses the analepsis to show that the system's response to the subaltern's pursuit of knowledge—whether spiritual or academic—is always and necessarily one of violent correction.

The analepsis thus functions as a structural template: the *Uttara Kanda* narrative becomes the original sin and the founding legal document of the Hindu epic tradition, a source of violence that endlessly repeats itself. B.R. Ambedkar explicitly noted this structural necessity of violence in the *Ramayana*, stating, in *Riddles in Hinduism*, that the killing of Shambuka was “not an incidental act” but a fulfillment of “the law of the Chaturvarnya” (Ambedkar 128). The play's very form dictates that the reader/spectator cannot understand the crushing present (Vemula) without acknowledging the *structural necessity* of the mythological past event (Shambuka), which is introduced via this inescapable analepsis. The analepsis here is not mere memory; it is a structural return, a demonstration that the past has never truly passed. The mythological history is perpetually foregrounded to prove that the caste system is an engine of history, not its passive subject. The textual script ensures that the logic of exclusion remains visible, refusing to allow the comfortable illusion of historical progress or social reform to mask the continuous operation of the *varna* principle.

This relentless structural necessity introduced by the backward-looking analepsis is then balanced and authenticated by the force of the forward-looking prolepsis. Conversely, the documents, official university circulars, personal testimonies, and most pivotally, the text of Rohit Vemula's suicide note, function as a kind of political prolepsis or flashfront. While chronologically the Vemula episode represents the ‘present’ of the play, the narrative deployment and the relentless logic of the script suggest a predictive function. Genette defines prolepsis as “any narrative movement forward” (Genette 63), often used to reveal an event that will

happen later. In *Vemular Ramayana*, Vemula's fate—given the structural analepsis of Shambuka—is revealed to be inevitable, suggesting a temporal destiny. Vemula's institutional destruction is presented not as a tragic individual failure, but as the logical, necessary, and pre-written outcome of the structural violence encoded in the past.

The political activism, the PhD scholarship (the modern, secular equivalent of *tapasya*), and the profound intellectual frustration articulated in his note are not unique, contingent events, but rather a pre-scripted destiny mandated by the Chronotope of Caste. His final, searing words, "My birth is my fatal accident," become the ultimate proleptic statement about the determined future of any marginalized scholar who dares to enter and contest the elite space of institutional knowledge production. The narrative use of the suicide note, appearing textually as the culmination of the university's administrative actions, functions as a horrific prophecy fulfilled, a textual *telos* driven by caste logic. The play's narrative structure, in its relentless textual cutting between the mythological execution and the modern bureaucratic file, uses the past (analepsis) to justify the crushing inevitability of the present (prolepsis). This rigorous use of Genette's anachronies contributes directly to the crux of the problem: by collapsing the temporal distance within the script, the play textually demonstrates that the caste system is a non-historical, immutable, and structurally successful enterprise.

The play's reliance on Vemula's note also engages with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 280). Vemula's note is a textual articulation of his pain and critique, yet it is simultaneously a document that confirms his total institutional defeat and silence—the ultimate act of subaltern self-erasure required by the system, proving that his voice can only be heard through the radical act of withdrawal. The prolepsis of his death acts as a warning, making every future Dalit entry into the university a fulfillment of an already written tragic script.

To fully grasp the political weight of this temporal collapse—the merging of *yuga* and year—the play's structure must be analyzed through the seminal theoretical lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's Chronotope. Bakhtin's

concept of the *chronotope* (literally, “time-space”) refers to the intrinsic and inseparable interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in a literary text. In his essay, *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*, Bakhtin writes: “We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time-space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 84). In *Vemular Ramayana*, Kar’s dramatic script achieves its structural critique by destroying the conventional, linear, progressive chronotopes of ‘History’ and ‘Modern Democracy’ and replaces them with a single, overriding, and unchanging Chronotope of Caste.

The Time (Chronos) of the play is not a timeline of forward progress but a cyclical, repetitive temporality where the mythological *Treta Yuga* and the 21st Century University exist not sequentially, but simultaneously. The administrative circulars expelling Vemula are ethically and structurally identical to Rama’s sword stroke: both are instruments of caste maintenance. This structural time denies the very possibility of historical progress, reform, or social justice within the caste framework. The play meticulously demonstrates how the bureaucratic time of the modern university—marked by delays in fellowships, suspensions, and administrative committee meetings—is merely the modern avatar of the mythological time of divine decree and *dharma* violation. The slow, grinding procedural time of the institutional process is shown to be just as lethal as the instantaneous, divine justice meted out by Rama. Both temporal modes are designed not to find justice, but to maintain the status quo by exhausting the marginalized.

The Space (Topos) of the play is similarly collapsed from the forest *ashram* of Shambuka into the hostel room of Vemula. The ancient space of spiritual prohibition (the forest, where Shudras could not perform *tapasya*) and the modern space of institutional knowledge production (the university, where Dalits seek intellectual liberation) merge into a single, defined, and contained space of exclusion and annihilation. Bakhtin emphasizes that the chronotope gives body to abstract ideas; here, the script gives body to the abstract idea of “Knowledge Prohibition.” Shambuka’s forest is rendered not as a wild, natural space, but as a site under legal jurisdiction, subject to royal enforcement of *varna* law.

Vemula's hostel room is rendered not as a private refuge, but as the final, isolated administrative space of public expulsion. The structural similarity of these spaces proves the continuity of the legal principle: knowledge, whether spiritual or academic, is an enclosure reserved for the dominant classes, and any subaltern entry is a transgression demanding violent purification.

The Chronotope of Caste thus establishes the crux of the problem: the structure of violence is so fundamental, so deeply encoded in the institutional DNA of the nation, that it transcends specific eras, technologies, and settings. The university, in this textual rendering, is merely the modern, bureaucratized *dharma*-court, and the administrative file is the modern mythological text used to sanction the elimination of the subaltern who dares to transgress the boundaries of knowledge. The play rigorously exemplifies how caste makes time stop and space shrink for the marginalized. Sociologist Satish Deshpande's analysis is key here, as he writes on the persistent denial of substantive equality: "The contemporary Indian landscape is littered with evidence of the continuity of caste, despite the strong constitutional commitment to its abolition" (Deshpande 92). The play dramatically embodies this evidence, showing how the administrative machinery is the contemporary tool of this continuity.

The play's act of naming itself *Vemular Ramayana* constitutes its core intertextual strategy, moving beyond mere homage or adaptation into direct confrontation. Intertextuality, the shaping of a text's meaning by other texts, here involves a confrontational, dialectical dialogue between three key texts: Valmiki's *Ramayana* (the dominant archive), B.R. Ambedkar's revolutionary critiques (the ideological counter-text), and Rohit Vemula's final note (the contemporary subaltern voice). Kar's text operates as a militant 'counter-archive' by formally challenging the mythological and political authority of the hegemonic narrative. By merging the mythological narrative with the documentary evidence, the play strips Valmiki's epic of its divine, aesthetic authority and forces it to register its direct complicity in continuous, structural violence. The play textually inverts the traditional hierarchy: the god/king (Rama) is decentered and exposed as the first agent of caste violence, while the

victim/martyr (Vemula) is foregrounded in the very title and structure. This is not merely a political statement, but a profound formal declaration that the subaltern text must absorb and rewrite the dominant text to articulate its own suffering and resistance.

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, a key voice in Dalit intellectualism, provides the philosophical underpinning for this counter-archival imperative, arguing in *Why I Am Not a Hindu* that the struggle is fundamentally against the philosophical and political texts of the dominant culture. Shepherd states: “The main problem that the Hindu texts face is that they have to hold Dalit-Bahujan history in suspension while constantly rewriting their own,” (Shepherd 175) thus making the act of rewriting, as Kar undertakes, essential to recovering the dignity and historicity of the oppressed. Kar’s *Vemular Ramayana* performs this exact function: it refuses to let the official history (the *Ramayana*) exist outside the history of its victims. The entire script functions as a textual act of Dalit retrieval, re-contextualizing the venerated epic not as a spiritual guide, but as a political blueprint for exclusion that must be continually updated and challenged by contemporary resistance. The intertextual weight of the title alone demands that the reader view the modern tragedy through the lens of ancient structural injustice.

The structural power of the play resides in its ability to parallel two distinct yet structurally identical forms of knowledge denial, aligning precisely with Ambedkar’s foundational analysis of the socio-religious foundations of caste. The Ancient Archive justifies the violence against Shambuka through divine sanction—the necessity of restoring the purity of *Chaturvarnya* (the four-fold varna system). Rama’s execution of Shambuka is presented as a fulfillment of *Rajadharma* (the duty of the King), an act of cosmic restoration. The textual execution is swift, brutal, and mythologically sanctified, underscoring the necessity of violence in the *Ramayana*’s vision of ideal kingship.

The Modern Archive presents the institutional records, bureaucratic memos, and Vemula’s note. Here, the denial of Vemula’s scholarship and dignity is justified through bureaucratic procedure—administrative circulars, disciplinary action, and withdrawal of institutional privileges.

The play textually demonstrates that the modern alibi of “institutional procedure” or “disciplinary action” is functionally, morally, and politically identical to the ancient alibi of restoring *dharma*: both are sophisticated mechanisms designed to preserve the monopoly on knowledge and power. The text compels the reader to confront Ambedkar’s radical conclusion from *Annihilation of Caste*: “Caste is not merely a division of labour but is also a division of labourers,” (Ambedkar 67) and, crucially, a division of access to the means of intellectual and economic production. The play shows that the “crime” is not the *act* of seeking knowledge, but the *identity* of the actor who seeks it. Shambuka sought spiritual equality; Vemula sought intellectual equality. The play’s dramaturgy, by constantly shifting between the two episodes, creates a textual feedback loop, asserting that the systemic function demands the continuous production of Shambukas and Vemulas to sustain the hierarchy. The modern university, therefore, becomes the new, bureaucratically sanitized space for the ritualistic, administrative annihilation of social mobility and intellectual aspiration.

The structural homology is made complete by examining the specific nature of the transgression in both instances. Shambuka was killed for performing *tapasya*, an act intended to gain spiritual knowledge and transcendence, traditionally reserved for the twice-born. Vemula was isolated and driven to death for pursuing a PhD in social sciences, an act intended to gain intellectual knowledge and structural critique, theoretically open to all in a democracy. The script ensures that the textual link between these two actions is explicit: the right to knowledge production is the forbidden fruit. Ambedkar dedicated his life to breaking this monopoly, emphasizing the necessity of *Shiksha* (education) as the path to emancipation. The play reveals that the modern state apparatus, masked by the language of merit and procedure, fundamentally resists this emancipation, making any successful Dalit entry into the hallowed halls of academia a *transgression* akin to Shambuka’s unauthorized penance. The textual power of *Vemular Ramayana* lies in its ability to strip away the veneer of secular modernity, revealing the deep, structural religious logic operating at the heart of state institutions. The play thus succeeds as an intellectual tool by forcing the reader to recognize that

the violence is not a sign of institutional *failure*, but rather evidence of its successful, historical caste function.

Anshuman Kar's *Vemular Ramayana* is a masterful example of a Subaltern dramatic text that uses formal structural techniques to achieve profound and enduring contemporary political commentary. By focusing on the textual architecture—the rigorous use of Genette's analepsis and prolepsis—the play successfully collapses mythological and contemporary time, thereby creating a Chronotope of Caste that illustrates the structural, ethical, and bureaucratic homology between ancient *Rajadharma* and modern institutional discrimination. This extensive textual reading, rigorously grounded in the philosophical legacy of B.R. Ambedkar and the narrative frameworks of Bakhtin, Genette, and Elam, demonstrates beyond doubt that the denial of knowledge, whether spiritual (*tapasya*) or academic (scholarship), is the most consistent and lethal mechanism for maintaining caste hierarchy in India. The play's core textual strategy—the inversion of epic authority and the creation of a unified archive of violence—challenges the reader to move beyond mythological devotion and engage with the searing political reality that the structural foundations of the epic narrative are, tragically and consistently, still playing out in the institutions of modern democracy.

Vemular Ramayana is not merely a tragedy of two individuals separated by epochs, but a powerful, formally brilliant textual record of an immutable system of exclusion. It demands, through its dramatic structure, that the nation confront the violence necessary to sustain its cherished social order. The profound contribution of Kar's script is its formal insistence that the struggle for Dalit dignity is fundamentally a struggle against time itself—a recursive, cyclical time that must be broken by recognizing the past in the present. The play, by its very existence, is an act of temporal defiance, opening up a future where the Shambuka/Vemula sequence is finally, and permanently, concluded.

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Feminist Voice of Resistance in Poile Sengupta's Play *Alipha*

Samim Aktar Molla

Abstract

Poile Sengupta, one of the foremost Indian English dramatists, published *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play* (2010), a collection of six plays exploring a wide range of issues—family relationships, sexual abuse, struggle for women's empowerment, love and passion, desire and revenge, dynastic politics etc. These plays are bound together by a common thread—the position and role of women in family, social and political system. Sengupta's play "Alipha" presents a compelling narrative that explores the intersection of gender, power, and resistance. Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, the play follows the life of a woman, metaphorically named Alipha, who defies societal norms and challenges oppressive structures. Through her journey, Sengupta vividly portrays the struggles and triumphs of women in a male-dominated world.

At its core, *Alipha* embodies the feminist voice of resistance, showcasing how women navigate and resist oppressive systems. Through Alipha's character, Sengupta challenges traditional notions of femininity and highlights the strength and resilience of women. Alipha's defiance of societal expectations and her refusal to conform to gender roles make her a powerful symbol of resistance. The dialogues of the Woman and the Mantheatrically dramatises the binary oppositions prevalent in society, and caustically reflects the inner thoughts and struggles of the characters. Furthermore, Alipha underscores the importance of solidarity among women in the face of adversity. The bond between Alipha and other female characters in the play serves as a testament to the strength

of female relationships and the collective power of women in challenging oppressive structures. “Alipha” thus appears to be a powerful depiction of the feminist voice of resistance, highlighting the struggles and triumphs of women in a patriarchal society, ultimately advocating for gender equality and empowerment.

Keywords: Poile Sengupta; Alipha; binary oppositions; women empowerment; resistance; gender; power

Poile Sengupta's *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play* (2010) is a collection of six plays—“Mangalam,” “Inner Laws,” “Keats Was A Tuber,” “Alipha,” “Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni” and “Samara's Song”—exploring a wide range of issues—family relationships, sexual abuse, struggle for women's empowerment, love and passion, desire and revenge, dynastic politics etc. These plays are bound together by a common thread—the position and role of women in family, social and political systems where the characters are caught in a complex web of power, the victims strive to protest, and the consequence is violence. Poile Sengupta is one of the foremost Indian English dramatists involved in the theatre of protest. Her “Alipha” stands as a poignant testament to the enduring struggle of women against patriarchal norms and societal constraints. Through the exploration of themes such as gender discrimination, societal expectations, and the resilience of the human spirit, Sengupta crafts a powerful feminist narrative that resonates with audiences worldwide.

Central to the narrative of “Alipha” is its female protagonist navigating the complexities of womanhood in a society rife with prejudice and discrimination. Alipha, a young woman whose fiery spirit and unwavering resolve serve as a catalyst for change. Despite facing numerous obstacles, Alipha refuses to be silenced, daring to defy convention and pursue her dreams. Central to the feminist discourse of “Alipha” are themes of gender and power, as Sengupta interrogates the structures of patriarchy that govern the lives of her characters. Throughout the play, women are subjected to various forms of oppression, from domestic violence to societal ostracism, highlighting the pervasive nature of gender-based

discrimination. Yet, even in the face of such adversity, the women of “Alipha” refuse to be passive victims, instead reclaiming agency over their bodies and destinies.

As the narrative of “Alipha” unfolds, it becomes clear that individual acts of resistance are not enough to dismantle patriarchal structures. Instead, it is through collective action and solidarity that meaningful change can be achieved. The women come together to support and uplift one another, forming a formidable force against the forces of oppression. Whether through clandestine meetings or public protests, these women refuse to be silenced, demanding recognition and respect in a society that seeks to marginalize them. In doing so, they forge bonds of sisterhood that transcend the boundaries of caste, class, and religion, united in their shared struggle for liberation. Through their collective efforts, Sengupta suggests that true empowerment lies not in individual achievement, but in the strength of community and the power of unity.

As in all other plays in the omnibus, “Alipha” develops on the basis of a set of conflicting ideologies and activities—men and women, political and apolitical, powerful and powerless, rich and poor, exploiter and exploit, hatred and respect etc. With the help of modern theatrical techniques of light and sound, the dramatist creates two worlds with just a woman and a man on the stage. The purpose behind her application of these binary oppositions is not to malign all men but to indicate to and proclaim the necessity and prospect of women empowerment in the human world.

The setting of the play, at the very first glance, displays as well as anticipates the antithetical plots of the play—

The stage is divided into two acting areas. ... There must be a contrast made between the two areas to indicate that the MAN comes from a wealthy background and the WOMAN is of humbler circumstances (Sengupta 341).

The very first binary opposition found as soon as the curtain opens is that between the rich and the poor, between the “wealthy” and the

“humblar.” The opening stage direction or the set of the play somehow or other moulds the mindset of the audience to compare the antithesis and conceive the plots accordingly. The darkness that divides the worlds of the woman and the man on the stage referees the narratives. The constant switching on and off of light transports the audience from one world to the other not only to trace the development in the plots but also interestingly to notice the contrast between the two worlds more vividly and promptly. The two narratives, “like pieces in a jigsawpuzzle,” (Sengupta 339) are “dovetailed;” but each “storyline” is “independently carried forward.”

The apostrophic address of the child-woman to her “invisible friend” at the very beginning of the action of the play immediately finds a binary opposition in the middle-aged man’s meta-theatrical address to the audience. While the Woman sincerely shares all her emotions and observations with her absent friend (Asma) and asks for her suggestions and support, the Man is in a kind of constant confession. The contrast between innocence and offence is immediately recognisable as soon as the maiden speeches of the Woman and the Man are delivered. The dramatic monologue of the Child-Woman at the beginning ends up with her assertion of friendship and a promise: “I am not hating you... never...never. You are my bestest friend Asma...Bester than everyone. Promise” (Sengupta 342). The Man’s first monologue, on the other hand, at once evinces abhorrence—hatred for his father from whom, he himself declares, inherits both the costly old armchair on which he is found sitting and the “distinguished” attitude, ironically the disturbed state of mind:

You see me sitting here in this old armchair...sitting back... smoking...apparently at peace. How would you describe me, huh? Middle-aged? Greying? Distinguished...? Certainly distinguished. (*Laughs.*) I get that from my father...the being distinguished. From my fucking father. (*Pause.*) Damn him... Yeah. You’re right. I am not at peace. I may appear to be....But I’m not. Ionly have to trick myself into thinking thateverything’s fine....But that’s not true (342).

Contradictions are evident in the matters of paternal legacy of the Man and the Woman. The Man, whose father is powerful both financially and politically, and is still influentially alive, is completely arrogant to free himself from his father's authority. All his speeches where he mentions his father are savage and full of resentment. His repugnant conception of his father's paternal guidance aggravates his tranquility, and he becomes more and more inclined to seek revenge. To seek revenge, the Man completely deteriorates towards immoral, unethical and illicit activities. He ultimately becomes a victim to find mitigation of all his indignation in an illicit sexual pleasure. The pleasure makes him totally enraptured as well as entrapped where he begins to be afraid to escape from. Later on, when the particular woman, with whom he finds his anguish dissolved, dies, he sets his mind to take a number of revenges, and decides to muster political power culminating in the rivalry with his father. The Woman, on the contrary, gradually discovers his dead father's social contributions and consequently inherits his ethics and altruism. She devotes herself in educating not only the children but also the adult women, and dreams of making "all the women in our country literate" (Sengupta 367). She cannot hide her inherited spirit to raise voice against corruption: she rushes to mass welfare and, to say specifically, women empowerment. The more she comes to know about his dead father, the more she feels respectful to him. Her mature self begins to question the fallacies of socio-political customs and traditions, and asserts the importance of active participation of women in the emancipation of human beings. Thus, the Man's responsibility to his parents ends up in anger, hatred and rivalry, while the Woman's ends up in respect, love and benevolent continuity of her paternal legacy.

Sincerity and hypocrisy—two contradictory human attributes—are in constant juxtaposition in "Alipha." The playwright seems to have taken conscious care to contrast these two attributes with a professed target. The more the Man proceeds in his narrative, the more his image appears dark, menacing and murderous to the audience; the more the Woman grows up, the more her portrayal appears bright, promising and philanthropic. While the Woman has been learning to live in society, the Man has already conjured himself to leave society. An almost alienated

self, the Man contrives plots for revenge—revenge incidentally against society. The Woman fraternizes herself with society that, at least initially, impedes her mere growing up. The Man's hypocrite mixing with the masses, apparently philanthropic appearance to the workers in his father's garment factory were to have a base of his own, to gain power only to take revenge. The Woman, on the other hand, struggles to educate herself and to educate children and women to empower them. The Man boasts of his Shakuni-like vengeance; the Woman perceives the abundance and essence of religions. She succeeds to remember her god before she dies, and thus touches the spiritual. He falls a prey to poetic justice by the inevitable arrival of nemesis.

Poile Sengupta deliberately creates these binary oppositions purposefully to advocate women empowerment. Her purpose is not to project men to be bad, but to portray the ill effects of age-old patriarchy and its chauvinism. Through *Alipha*, Sengupta powerfully represents the precarious condition of women in a society that punishes them for their gendered existence. The dramatist interrogates the paradox of social morality wherein the male perpetrator roams freely while the Woman, burdened by shame and fear, internalizes guilt as if she were the offender. This gendered asymmetry resonates with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which operates not merely through coercion but through the internalization of control. The Woman's hesitancy to articulate her trauma is a result of this disciplinary regime, where social institutions—family, state, and education—collaborate to perpetuate female submission. Although the protagonist identifies as a social activist, her activism becomes a double-edged construct: while it empowers her to resist, it also exposes the deep scars left by patriarchal domination. Sengupta thus dramatizes the irony of feminist struggle—the coexistence of agency and vulnerability within the same subject.

Despite the pervasive oppression, Sengupta's vision is not entirely pessimistic. The Woman's voice, though fractured, becomes an instrument of resistance. Her commitment to education and social reform affirms the transformative potential of knowledge—a theme central to both feminist and postcolonial discourses. Education here serves as

what Foucault calls a “counter-discourse,” a means to dismantle hegemonic structures and produce new subjectivities. Through literacy and awareness, women begin to contest the patriarchal grammar of silence and shame. Sengupta aligns this transformation with the broader feminist trajectory in India, where education and social activism have enabled women to renegotiate their roles within family and society.

Ultimately, “Alipha” envisions a feminist awakening grounded in self-realization and intellectual empowerment. Sengupta’s theatre transforms the stage into a site of contestation where women reclaim agency over narrative, body, and identity. By situating private trauma within public discourse, she challenges the boundaries between victimhood and activism. In doing so, Sengupta’s “Alipha” not only critiques the moral bankruptcy of patriarchy but also reimagines resistance as an act of speaking, remembering, and rewriting—the very processes that destabilize structures of power.

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**Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions*:
A Look Back at the History of Division**

Tilok Naskar

“After forty years... I opened my diary again. And I wrote. A dozen pages before. A dozen pages now. A young girl's childish scribble. An old woman's shaky scrawl. Yes, things have not changed that much.”

What Hardika in Mahesh Dattani's three act play *Final Solutions* (which was first performed at Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore on July 10, 1993) says about the riots that had taken away the life of her father on the eve of independence, is still very much relevant even seventy seven years after the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Hardika, one of the central characters of the play, clearly highlights the ugly face of communalism that had existed even before the independence of our nation. “Communalism,” according to Randhir Sing, “was then perceived primarily as an imperialism-instigated divisive and false doctrine and it was sought to be opposed variously in terms of idealist humanism, liberal nationalism even ‘true religion’, and above all in terms of the emerging unifying ideology of nationalism.” (44) Though the inspiration behind the writing of the play came from the ‘Tazia’ communal riots that had taken place in Ahmedabad in 1985, its publication and performance coincided with the demolition of the Babri Masjid. After the demolition, Hindu nationalists took out a victory parade, while the secularists organised protest demonstrations. Events of largescale communal violence and massacre took place all over the country, and the unrest lasted for about two months. About the Hindu-Muslim violence and the carnage of Partition, Peter Morey and Alex Tickell have commented that “historical suspicions between Hindus and Muslims could still act as mobilizing principles leading to extreme violence and brutality; and a new militancy

was abroad among some in the majority Hindu population which sought to reclaim certain sites and privileges considered to have been ceded to minorities during the years since Independence in 1947.” (x) After the partition of India, the makers of the Indian Constitution thought that a new India would be structured on the basis of national unity, integration and excellence. But, unfortunately, instances of communal violence breaking out every year have belied their visions and objectives. Some like the academician N. S. Gehlot have stated that in the post partition period, the state agency “in the name of minorities, under our Constitutional law, has sustained communalism in our polity, and therefore, the Indian leaders have miserably failed to control the scourge of communal violence and riots.” (vii) Mahesh Dattani was deeply conscious and worried about the violence and the contemporary communal politics in India, but he never thought of writing a play on the problems of the Hindus and Muslims. It was Alyque Padamsee who inspired him and then invited him during an improvisation at the J. B. Petit school in Mumbai, to write a play about this. About his writing of *Final Solutions*, Dattani in his book *Me and My Plays* admitted:

I had begun work on my new play *Bravely Fought the Queen* and was putting the finishing touches to it when I got a call from Alyque. He asked me if I was aware of the motion in Parliament by the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) about building a temple in Ayodhya in place of the existing mosque. I was in my early thirties then, but as naive about politics as today’s seventeen-year old. This wasn’t even headline news at that time and so had slipped my attention. Alyque was most concerned with the rise of religious fundamentalism and was certain of a pogrom brewing that would destroy the cultural harmony of the country yet again. I wasn’t too sure of doing a play on the Hindu-Muslim divide. Sensing my hesitation, he invited me to Mumbai and arranged an improvisation with Pearl Padamsee’s students at the J. B. Petit school. The improvisation had two Muslim boys who, running away from a mob that is out to kill them, seek shelter in a Hindu household. The improvisation was riveting and I could see the dramatic possibilities.

It took me almost two years to write it. Again, I was keen to do my own production in Bangalore first. But a week before the

scheduled performance at the theatre festival, the Babri Masjid was destroyed. Although I had based my play on the Tazia riots in Ahmedabad in the 1980s, the play now took on a different shade. The festival organizers pulled the play out of the festival at the last minute. (30)

A man of immense creativity in the theatrical arena, an insightful critic of contemporary Indian society and an observer of the often caste-ridden, superstitious, and politically corrupted people, Mahesh Dattani played a pivotal role in rousing the conscience of his contemporaries by writing his path-breaking play, *Final Solutions*. In this play, Dattani turned as Angelie Multani puts it, “to his immediate context and history to situate himself and his work in, without apologies, excuses, justifications or consciousness of a postcolonial angst.” (18)

Despite not being a historian, Dattani represents in the play the ugly history of the partition and subsequent onset of communal tensions within the nation. Hardika’s father was one of the thousands of innocent people who were killed on the eve of Independence. Even as the citizens of India were waiting enthusiastically to observe the birth of the nation, the Britishers “let loose the dogs” before leaving the country forever, leaving behind them violence, carnage and riots. In the words of Hardika:

We – (*Trying hard to read her hand writing.*) – gained independence. You should have seen it. Everyone was awake waiting for midnight – like children on the last day of school, waiting for the last bell of the last class before vacation. And then rushing out and screaming and shouting and fighting. (The MOB/ CHORUS *whisper ‘Freedom! At last! Freedom!’ They do not work to a crescendo, they continue over DAKSHA.*) My father had fought for that hour. And he was happy when it came. He said he was happy we were rid of the Britishers. He also said something I did not understand then. He said that before leaving, they had let loose the dogs. I hated to think that he was talking about my friend’s fathers ... But that night in Hussainabad in our ancestral house – when I heard them outside – I knew that they were thinking of the same of us.

Forty years ago, in the time-scheme of the play, the Muslims had

killed her father in a communal riot, and had pelted stones at their Hindu house and had destroyed all her prized possessions – gramophone records of Noor Jehan, Suraiya and Shamshad Begum. Forty years later, a similar communal riot comes back to Hardika's life experience in the small town of Amargaon where she lived and where a curfew had to be imposed due to an outbreak of communal violence. The violence had started when some miscreants had pelted stones at a religious chariot, broke its idols and killed the pujari. A Mob described in the play as wearing Hindu masks, is in a mood to take revenge against the Muslims. A note of hostility, disharmony and hatred is clearly heard in their irrational comments. Significantly, the Hindu Mob refer to the Muslims as "they", and the conversation between them run thus:

Chorus1: The procession has passed through these lanes
Every Year
For Forty Years!

Chorus 2,3: How Dare they?

Chorus 1,2,3: For forty years our chariot has moved through their mohallas.

.....

Chorus 2,3: They broke our rath.

They broke our chariot
and felled our gods!

Chorus 1,2,3: This our land!

.....

Chorus 2: The stone that hit our God was no accident!

Chorus 3: The knife that slit the poojari's stomach was no accident.

Amidst the suspicion, tension and chaos reigning outside on the streets of the town, the action of the play takes place in Ramnik Gandhi's house where two Muslim youths named Javed and Bobby take refuge upon being chased by a mob of fanatic Hindus. Ramnik Gandhi shows his liberal attitude by giving shelter those two 'outsiders' in his house, but we learn that he had done so out of a personal sense of grief and

guilt. The coming of the two young men immediately evokes sentiments of unease and disquiet among the other members of Ramnik Gandhi's household. His mother Hardika/Daksha immediately remembers her own ugly past and says: "How could he let these people into my house?" Aruna, the wife of Ramnik and an orthodox Hindu, also has negative feelings about the entry of the two Muslim boys in her house. Her prejudiced mind is revealed in her very reluctant act of offering of glasses of water to the visitors and of her keeping away of the glasses from which the Muslim boys had drunk from her other glasses.

The second act progresses with misunderstanding and misinformation, and an attempt to review opinions in an effort to resolve irrational and illogical thoughts. Upon coming to know that Smita knows Javed and Baban, the two Muslim youths, Ramnik asks a series of questions regarding his daughter's connection with Bobby and Javed. Smita clarifies that Javed was her college friend Tasneem's brother, and that Bobby was Tasneem's fiancé. In this act, the conversations between the characters are largely logical and friendly. When Ramnik comes to know that it was Javed's father to whom he has talked over the phone, he questions: "Why didn't he tell me that his son was here?" To this, Javed replies: "My father didn't tell you about me, because he didn't know where I was. (*Defiantly*) I don't live with my parents." Hardika. A little unwillingly, agrees to let the two boys stay for the night and tells Ramnik to give them pillows and bedsheets to sleep over. Dattani indicates in this Act that while it is often a fashion to accuse the whole Muslim community negatively, there are many liberal and open minded persons like Bobby too in the Muslim community who serve as a bridge between the communities. On the other side, divisive and communal attitudes are made prominent through the dialogues of Aruna and Javed. Aruna's communal attitude is made evident when she suggests that Ramnik should stop Smita's studies and disallow her from leaving home so that she would not keep any contact with Javed and Bobby. Parallely, a hatred towards the Hindu community is indicated through Javed's comments. However, the reality is exposed by the statement of Smita that it is the political parties which play key roles behind the curtain and use people like Javed as instruments to instigate riots. Smita says, "Those –

parties! They hire him! That's how he makes a living. They bring him and many more to the city to create riots. To...throw the first stones!"

The bitter truth exposed here is that it is politics based on religion and religious fundamentalism that causes serious damage to our society by promoting sectarianism and separatism. Gehlot has observed that the state agencies or the rulers of the state have often "resorted to cultural politics just to strengthen their hold on power or to build their vote-banks rather than to promote the cause of secular society." (vii) Pandav Nayak has remarked that "communalism is primarily an ideological theme which is appropriated by the dominant as well as the dominated classes for reactionary or progressive reasons respectively." (Engineer, 29) Even Ramnik, a 'structured secular' who has a limited sense of this idea, tries to tolerate and respect other religion but fails at last, thus symbolizing the fragility of Indian secularism. It needs to be noted at this point that the meaning of secular in India is very much different from its implication in the west. In the west, secularism implies a separation of the state and religion, but in our country, the meaning of secularism is a more complex in that it highlights an ideological tolerance of religious faiths and equal respect paid to all religions. However, this idealistic view is observed more in the breach than practice. This becomes evident in the following conversations quoted from the play:

Ramnik: Why do you distrust us?

Javed: Do you trust us?

Ramnik: I don't go about throwing stones!

Javed: But you do something more violent. You provoke! You make me throw stones! Every time I look at you, my bile rises!

Ramnik: (Angry) Now you are provoking me! How dare you blame your violence on other people? It is in you! You have violence in your mind. Your life is based on violence. Your faith is based ...
(*He stops, but it is too late.*)

This shows that even the proclaimed secularist Ramnik fails to hold his patience, ultimately blaming the whole Muslim community and their religion. Talking about *Final Solutions*, Sunanda Shelake admits that Dattani "presents not only religious fanaticism but fanaticism in all walks

of life”, and that “most people, overtly or covertly, are party to acts of fanaticism and are responsible for a good deal of the conflicts that exist within society.” (180)

Nevertheless, the ending of the play shows how Dattani tries to establish a possible solution to this deep rooted problem. What is important here is that every character is firm in their belief but at the end they try to compromise themselves in respect of respect and tolerance. Angelie Multani remarks, “An unexpected alliance in the play is that between Javed and Aruna – they are both individuals who have a strong belief in their faith, in the things that shape their identities and their ideas of their selves. Finally forced to realise the position of the other, they are also forced to articulate a respect and tolerance.” (118) The role of Bobby is of the greatest significance here. As a symbolic new day breaks near the conclusion of the play, Bobby removes his footwear as a sign of respect and enters Aruna’s puja room and picks up the idol there, and despite Aruna’s protest, shows the idol to everyone and says:

He doesn’t humiliate you. He doesn’t cringe from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me. And He welcomes it! I hold Him who is sacred to them, but I do not commit sacrilege. (*To Aruna*) You can bath Him day and night, you can splash holy waters on Him but you cannot remove my touch from his form. You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe.

There can be little doubt that Bobby serves as Dattani’s mouthpiece here, advocating through him his own final message thus:

But if we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed. (*He puts on his footwear and looks at Hardika*) And if you are willing to forget, I am willing to tolerate.

In *Final Solutions*, Dattani tried to identify the root causes behind the antagonism between people of different religions resulting in the loss of moral, ethical, psychological and human values. Dr. Bipinkumar Parmar has commented that as the problems lie deep within the human psyche and human behavior, Dattani at the end of his play *Final Solutions*

“provides [a] theory of forget and tolerate for fighting back [the] demon of communal turmoil and tension.” (Parmar, 98) Dattani attempted through his play to provide a solution to the centuries old malady of division and hatred, the seeds of which had first been sown by the Mughal rulers during medieval period before being encouraged by the British colonial rulers of our country over the two centuries of their rule.

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Mad Women in select one-act plays of Tennessee Williams: A brief study

Shreya Sarkar

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the dramatic representations of madness in four one-act plays written by the American playwright Tennessee Williams (1911-83). The four texts are *This Property is Condemned*, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, *Portrait of a Madonna*, and *Hello from Bertha*. Some of the common themes in these works include mental instability or unconventional behavior in the characters resulting in institutionalization, the featuring of mental institutions as dramatic settings, and the use of dementia, insanity or madness as a metaphor for the idea of a loss of freedom or control. Literary madness and literal madness has an eerie similarity in that aberrational behavior in both provinces are often defined by comparing the behavior of one suspected of madness with that of those around them. However, dramatic representations of madness are different from everyday perceptions of insanity by often interrogating the notion of sanity. This may be seen in particular in the one-act plays that will be discussed here.

Keywords: Dementia, Madness, Insanity, Schizophrenia, Delusion of grandeur, Phobia, ...

“Manifested in behavior that ranges from extreme nervousness to obsession and hysteria, Williams’s representations of madness emphasized the grotesque yet nonetheless human elements of the individual psyche. His mad characters are often depicted sympathetically, even as their actions are implicitly or explicitly ostracized or punished” (Kolin 133).

As the observation by Philip C. Kolin quoted above indicates, Tennessee Williams is well known for the creation of psychologically complex characters. Perhaps this is a result of his profound interest in exploring mental instability and its consequences, interests motivated in part by his personal and family history. In the year 1937, Rose, his older sibling suffered a mental breakdown and had to be hospitalized. In fact she led her entire life confined to a mental institution, forced to live under private care. Her treatment regime included insulin therapy and eventually a lobotomy (a neurosurgical treatment for psychiatric disorder.) Thereafter Williams associated madness with confinement since he had seen this in the case of his sister. In his *Memoirs* (1975), he acknowledged that confinement had “always been the greatest dread of my life” (Williams 233). His response to this fear created in him an obsession to compulsively keep moving. In fact, throughout his adult life he continually changed his hotel or apartment and also the city in which he intended to stay. Indeed, his act of keeping on writing was an impulsive act of resistance. He was convinced that if he stopped writing, he would never be saved from the psychological affliction that had overpowered his sister. In short, he felt that sans writing, he would go mad. As found in many of the characters created by him, his own mental instability was propelled by drug and alcohol abuse. In the year 1969, he admitted himself voluntarily to the psychiatric ward of Barnes Hospital in St. Louis where he underwent rigorous treatment for drug and alcohol addiction. That year was named the ‘Stoned Age’ by the author himself. The psychoanalyst under whose care he was admitted was Lawrence Kubie, and significantly enough the doctors portrayed in his plays were depicted as perilous forces. One instance is Dr. Cukrowicz who decides to perform a lobotomy in the play *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). Williams’ obsession with madness appeared in a variety of forms throughout his career. As early as in 1937, the year Rose was institutionalized, he created a mentally perturbed figure called Abel White, a disbalanced pyromaniac (a person with an obsessive desire to set fire to things.) White was obsessed with young women in the play *Fugitive Kind* produced by the Mummens in St. Louis. He represents a character type that Williams would establish as madness.

Williams had a deep concern for those with a fragile mental health condition, and he often portrayed such individuals as either rebels or deviationists and depicted to what extent their social and economic conditions placed them in jeopardy. In his plays, he often used the element of madness or lunacy as a theme. Besides displaying his ability to create memorable women characters in his full-length plays, Williams is also known for his ability to draw characters who are inherently lunatic in his short plays as well. These short dramatic pieces written between 1930 and 1980 reveal tantalizing and fascinating perspectives on contexts such as dementia, madness, and insanity.

Dementia

The notion of *Dementia* first made its appearance in the European vernaculars in the seventeenth century (Ames, O'Brien, Burns, 4). Back in the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the *French Encyclopaedia* (1765) edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert defined "dementia" as "a disease consisting in a paralysis of the spirit characterized by abolition of the reasoning faculty. It differs from *fatuitas*, morosis, *stultitia* and *stoliditas* in that in the latter there is a weakening of understanding and memory; and from delirium which is a temporary impairment in the exercise of the said function." (Ames, O'Brien, Burns, 4).

Madness

Madness is described by Thomas Szasz as "a potpourri of emotions and behaviours, expressed verbally or more often non-verbally," including "anger, aggression, fear, frustration, confusion, exhaustion, isolation, conceit (megalomania, narcissism, self-dramatization), cowardliness, and difficulty getting on with others" (Szasz 12). Somewhat differently, in the article "Madness and Philosophy or Literature's Reason" published in the journal *Yale French Studies* (1975), the author Shoshana Felman defines madness in the following manner, "To deviate from reason knowingly, in the grip of a violent passion, is to be weak; but to deviate from it confidently and with the firm conviction that one is following it, is to be what we call mad" (206).

Insanity

An early twentieth century description of insanity may be seen in a paper entitled “What is Insanity?” published by Joseph Jastrow, a former professor of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin, in the journal *Current History*. According to him, “The primitive concept of insanity, surviving in early civilizations and later, is *possession*; the insane man is as one possessed” (403).

The short plays of Tennessee Williams

The string of characters from Williams’ one-act plays who may be labeled as demented, mad or insane are all “derivatives of a single image in the author’s unconscious,” according to Jacqueline O’Connor (29). One of them is Willie from the one-act play *This Property is condemned*. Set in the locale of a railroad embankment in the rural South, Willie is a girl, a school dropout from a poor family whose mother and sister have died. She is met by a young boy named Tom. Willie has inherited the habit of her deceased sister Alva of mixing freely with the strange men who visit the town via the railroad. Her house is condemned but, she still lives there fighting for subsistence and hoping to be delivered by one of her gentlemen callers, a familiar enough trope in the plays of Williams. The play depicts Willie as a victim of a psychological disorder which revolves around a borderline delusion of grandeur. She refuses to accept her own identity and believes that she is a replica of her dead older sister. While comparing her sister to a movie star, Willie declares with pride: “Engineers, firemen, conductors. Even the freight sup’rintendent. We run a boardinghouse for railroad men. She was I guess you might say The Main Attraction. Beautiful? Jesus, she looked like a movie star!” (Williams 251)

Willie was convinced that every girl needs social training to move in life, and she believed that she had learned “all of that” from her sister Alva who “had a wonderful popularity with railroad men” (Williams 251). She recalls how this popularity brought her elder sister desirable gifts such as a “big heart-shaped red silk box of assorted chocolates and nuts and hard candies” (Williams 251). It is mentioned that Alva had died of the same disease which the legendary actress Greta Garbo had died of, and about this Willie complacently says:” She had the same

what Alva died of. Lung affection” (Williams 253). Willie gradually comes to believe that Alva is now living inside her.

Willie’s case has a striking similarity with a syndrome that is called “Grandiose Delusion”. In the opinion of the authors of a paper titled “Grandiose delusions: A review and theoretical integration of cognitive and affective perspectives” published in the journal *Clinical Psychology*, this type of delusion (also called GDs) is to be found across a wide range of psychiatric conditions. GDs are denoted as false beliefs about having inflated worth, power, knowledge or a special identity, all of which are firmly sustained despite undeniable evidence to the contrary. In Williams’ play, Willie imagines that she is an exact copy of her dead older sister Alva whom she truly, madly, deeply idolized. As the play progresses, this becomes evident when she sings a song to Tom remembering her sister:

“You’re the only star

In my blue hea-ven

And you’re shining just

For me!

This is her clothes I got on. Inherited from her. Everything Alva’s is mine” (Williams 255).

Willie is only thirteen years old, but she dresses in a lurid manner in order to attract the railroad men, something that her sister had done for survival. She is painted by Williams in the play as:

“a remarkable apparition-thin as a beanpole and dressed in outrageous cast-off finery. She wears a long blue velvet party dress with a filthy cream lace collar and sparkling rhinestone beads. On her feet are battered silver kid slippers with large ornamented buckles. Her wrists and her fingers are resplendent with dimestore jewelry. She has applied rouge to her childish face in artless crimson daubs and her lips are made up in a preposterous Cupid’s bow. She is about thirteen and there is something ineluctably childlike and innocent in her appearance despite the makeup. She laughs frequently and wildly and with a sort of precocious, tragic abandon” (Williams 247).

This vivid description of Willie seems to highlight not only her appearance but also the element of madness in her which is symptomatized through her frequent bursts of erratic laughter.

Another one-act play of Tennessee Williams, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, which was originally produced in New York in 1947, is a comedy set in a French Quarter boarding house similar to the one that Williams would later use in his drama *Vieux Carre*. The title of the one-act play refers to a common cure for body lice, which the pretentious Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore uses as nail polish remover, or so she claims to her landlady, Mrs. Wire. After Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore complains about the cockroaches in her room, the landlady accuses her of being a whore and demands late rent money. Another vagrant tenant mentioned in the play and referred to simply as 'The Writer', defends Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore. While both these characters anticipate the outcasts and artists depicted in Williams' longer plays, especially *Vieux Carre* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore is clearly the more abnormal of the two for she has a morbid fear of flying cockroaches. Indeed, if her reaction evokes laughter, it equally indicates a sense of madness, which might be traced back to a feeling of confinement due to homelessness. This is what she says to Mrs. Wire who seems to be surprised at hearing about Mrs. Moore's phobia at the ripe age of forty:

"Now I have had very little experience with cockroaches in my life but the few that I've seen before have been the pedestrian kind, the kind that walk. These, Mrs. Wire, appear to be flying cockroaches! I was shocked, in fact I was literally stunned, when one of them took off the floor and started to whiz through the air, around and around in a circle, just missing my face, by barely a couple of inches. Mrs. Wire, I sat down on the edge of this bed and wept, I was just so shocked and disgusted! Imagine! Flying cockroaches, something I never dreamed to be in existence, whizzing around and around in front of my face!" (Williams 82)

The *British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Edition)* in an article named "Phobias and their management" provides a detailed explanation of this type of mental disorder, thus:

“Phobias are fears of particular situations that do not normally bother most people. People with phobias tend to avoid the feared situations. Such phobic avoidance may cause considerable handicap. The patient knows that the fear is unreasonable, given the lack of objective danger. Phobias are distinguished from the normal fears that most people have by the intensity of the anxiety and the urge to avoid. The most common phobias are of public places (agoraphobia), of doing things under social scrutiny, and of specific cues like enclosed spaces, heights, darkness, thunderstorms, and particular types of animals and insects...More women than men tend to be sufferers, most phobias begin in young adult life, and all social classes are affected about equally. Almost every psychiatric treatment has been used for phobias, though few have been shown to be effective” (589).

What Mrs. Moore suffers from in the play is technically known as Katsaridaphobia, the fear of cockroaches. Individuals afflicted by this phobia often go to great lengths to prevent roaches from entering their homes, and this highly debilitating irrational fear often develops out of feelings of restriction or confinement.

The theme of insanity surfaces in yet another one-act play, *Portrait of a Madonna*. Here, the issue centers on a female protagonist named Lucretia Collins. A predecessor to Williams’ more famous later play *A Street car Named Desire*, the first production of *Madonna* was held in Los Angeles early in 1947. This one-act revolves around the middle-aged spinster Lucretia Collins who is removed from her home in a city apartment house and taken to a state institution by a doctor and a nurse who closely resemble the ones who come for Blanche in *Streetcar*. However, it is a less complex play than *Streetcar*, dramatizing only the final moments of freedom for Lucretia and narrating the circumstances of her commitment. We get to know that Lucretia’s mental abnormality had led her to imagine that an intruder had impregnated her. She is convinced that he had been her beloved when she was a young girl. His rejection of her had resulted in her delusionary flight from reality. The play in fact anticipates the mad characters common to Williams’ later plays emphasizing the fragility of the values of the Old South and the

inevitable changes that overwhelm it. This is indicated by the comments of the hotel workers about the southern ideals by which she had lived when they send her away to the mental institution. Williams makes it clear that her madness had been precipitated by asexual repression, itself the result of a severe Christian upbringing.

When the play opens, she is seen to be complaining in a frenzied manner about someone who she claims had sexually dishonored her. It is clear enough that the entire episode is no more than a figment of her imagination, but her tone and choice of words makes the situation sound starkly realistic and quite alarming,

“Yes, this is Miss Collins’ apartment on the top floor. I’ve refrained from making any complaint because of my connections with the church. I used to be assistant to the Sunday School superintendent and I once had the primary class... Yes, and now this has happened, I’m not responsible for it, but night after night this man has been coming into my apartment and –indulging his senses! Do you understand? Not once but repeatedly, Mr. Abrams! I don’t know whether he comes in the door or the window or up the fire escape or whether there’s some secret entrance they know about at the church, but he’s here now, in my bedroom, and I can’t force him to leave, I’ll have to have some assistance!” (Williams 109)

Even if she evokes the sympathy of the readers, all the other characters in the play laugh at her absurd imagining. Even the elevator boy comments sardonically, “An ole woman like her is disgusting, though, imaginin’ somebody’s raped her” (Williams 113). The fact is that Lucretia’s demented tale about “Richard” speaks volumes about her lonely, isolated life. She reads like an earlier version of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Alma in *Summer and Smoke*, but also possesses some similarities with Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, equally as with the female character in Williams’ short story *Completed*. As these works depict the mental and emotional instability of individuals who are sometimes deemed to be mad, madness from this perspective takes on the aspect of being a social category created for compartmentalizing and dealing with those who rebel and results in their confinement as a method for ensuring their silence. In psychological

terms, Lucretia Collins may be identified as suffering from the psychological condition known as Delusion which the renowned psychologist A.W. Young in the introduction to an article entitled, “Delusions” published in the journal *The Monist*, describes as a mental ailment:

“... often considered to be cardinal features of madness. Some psychiatrists still follow a tradition which regards them as not just out of touch with reality, but essentially unintelligible. From this viewpoint, delusions may be useful symptoms for identifying forms of mental illness, but their strange content is in principle ununderstandable. Many researchers do not accept this counsel of despair. Whilst accepting that delusions are certainly difficult to understand, they have begun to identify factors implicated in their formation and maintenance” (571).

Young further cites the explanation given by Brendan Arnold Maher who was a psychology professor at Harvard University, and who pioneered the scientific study of psychology in the laboratory and laid the groundwork for the study of psychology and its relationship to genetics. Maher was especially interested in human psychopathology, particularly schizophrenia. According to her, delusions are, “attempts to make sense of anomalous perceptual experiences. For example, an elderly person who does not notice that his hearing is failing may form the opinion that people are keeping secrets from him because they seem to be talking in low voices” (572). Thus in Maher’s opinion, “delusions reflect normal reasoning and inferences made from abnormal percepts” (572).

Several short plays which Williams wrote over the 1930s and the 40s feature characters suffering from delusions, depression, or delirium. In *Madonna*, Lucretia Collins exhibits various dimensions of delusional disorder inclined towards the erotomaniac category because she imagines that her past lover is still pursuing her in a frenzied manner. This syndrome is technically known as De Clérambault’s syndrome, and patients suffering from this ailment believe that another person, often someone important or famous, is in love with them (Jordan and Howe 978).

In another one-act play, *Hello from Bertha*, the plot centers around the failing spirit of Bertha, a destitute whore in an East St. Louis boarding house who is threatened with removal to a madhouse. Goldie, a fellow worker, cannot convince Bertha to leave her bed so that the other girls may use the room. Bertha cannot get over her ill-fated affair with Charlie, nor can she accept the fact that her whoring days are over. The epithet that Williams uses to describe her mental condition is “schizophrenic suspicion” (Williams 241). Hoping to be rescued from her state of destitution, Bertha is similar, as Philip C. Kolin argues, to Blanche DuBois as she hopes that she will be salvaged by an ideal man. This becomes clear when she commands Lena to write a letter for her addressed to her past lover, Mr. Charlie Aldrich:

“It’s 563 Central Avenue. Got it? Yeah, that’s right. Mr. Charlie Aldrich. Dear Charlie. They’re fixing to lock me up in the city bughouse. On a charge of criminal responsibility without due process of law. Got that? [Lena stops writing.] And I’m as sane as you are right this minute, Charlie. There’s nothing wrong with my upper story and there never will be. Got that? [Lena looks down and pretends to write.] So come on down here, Charlie, and bail me out of here, honey, for old times’ sake. Love and kisses, your old sweetheart, Bertha. ... Wait a minute. Put a P.S. and say how’s the wife and your -- No! Scratch it out! That don’t belong in there. Scratch it all out, the whole damn thing! [There is a painful silence. Bertha sighs and turns slowly on the bed, pushing her damp hair back.] Get you a clean sheet of paper. [Lena rises and tears another sheet from the tablet.]” (Williams 241).

Many other Williams’ themes are embedded in *Hello from Bertha*. Among these, the symbolic St. Louis setting that Williams addressed as a site to be abhorred, the tragic disappointments of a faded woman and the boarding house are used as “metaphor[s] for the cruel world” (Kolin 282). Williams depicts Bertha as a victim of a mental disorder called schizophrenia which Marco M. Picchioni and Robin M. Murray explain in an article entitled “Schizophrenia” published in the *British Medical Journal* describe as “one of the most serious and frightening of all mental illnesses” (91). According to them, “The name schizophrenia

derives from the early observation that the illness is typified by ‘the disconnection or splitting of the psychic functions.’ Unfortunately, this has led to the misconception that the illness is characterized by a ‘split personality,’ which it is not” (91). In their opinion, schizophrenia is a multifactorial disorder, and the greatest risk factor is a positive family history. Further, they state that “People with schizophrenia typically hear voices (auditory hallucinations), which often criticize or abuse them. The voices may speak directly to the patient, comment on the patient’s actions, or discuss the patient among themselves. Not surprisingly, people who hear voices often try to make some sense of these hallucinations, and this can lead to the development of strange beliefs or delusions” (91).

What Williams’ texts written about women and madness show is that these women usually display behavioral patterns which do not conform to the accepted norms of their society. At times, it does appear that their relegation to the category identified as “mad” is a social attempt to control them. The many instances of institutionalization indicate that women far more than men suffer from mental illnesses. The words of Elaine Showalter are particularly relevant in this context:

“By far the more prevalent view, however, sees an equation between femininity and insanity that goes beyond statistical evidence or the social conditions of women. Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists have called attention to the existence of a fundamental alliance between ‘woman’ and ‘madness’ “(Connor 33).

However, critics and scholars have tried to segregate these women in a number of ways. The literary critic Jacqueline O’Connor who has written extensively on Tennessee Williams, particularly focusing on the themes of madness, has provided a comprehensive list of such critics. She cites for instance, the scholar Robert Emmet Jones who after writing extensively on Williams’ work, particularly focusing on his female characters and their portrayal in plays such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*, divided the early heroines of the playwright into “genteel relics and healthy earth goddesses” (Connor 29). Others

like Nancy M. Tischler have used Jungian varieties of the 'Great Mother' figure and revoked their heroine-status and labeled them "A Gallery of Witches" (Connor 29). Critic Louise Blackwell analyzes Williams' female protagonists focusing on their circumstances during the action of the plays in which they figure. Her exact words are: "One approach to the study of these characters is to categorize them according to their situation at the time of the action, so long as we allow for variations within each category" (Blackwell 9). In her book *Women and Madness* (originally published in 1972), American psychologist and feminist Phyllis Chesler observes that for women, madness is sometimes "a doomed search for potency" (Connor 34) and the search often involves delusions of aggression, grandeur, sexuality and emotionality. Such traits in women are feared and punished in patriarchal mental asylums. Another critic, Philip W. Martin who is well-known for his book *Madwomen in Romantic Writing* (1987), declares that:

"the authorial exploration of the origin and etiology of female madness, as opposed to its mere display for emotional effect in earlier sentimental literature --discloses a myth of feminine derangement most accurately prefigured by the medical concept of erotomania, of the 'pathetic insanity' of the abandoned or bereaved woman..." (Martin 24).

Conclusion

In his insightful text *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault acutely observed that "Civilization, in a general way, constitutes a milieu favorable to the development of madness." (217) In consonance with this idea, Tennessee Williams through the portrayal of madness in his one-act plays, implied that society, threatened by lunacy, reacts by suppressing behavior that appears menacing and that individual freedom and originality are sacrificed to maintain the community's illusions about its normalcy. In short, Williams demonstrated with stories of mad characters his notion that American society sought to silence those who were thought of as abnormal in mentality or behaviour. However, Williams certainly wasn't the first playwright to dramatize madness. From the furious frenzies of Ajax or Agave to the twisted truths of Ophelia, Lear and

various mad fools, the stage has borne witness to centuries of mad ravings. Again, like the fools in Shakespeare's plays, these characters and their truths are often disregarded. However, unlike Shakespearean fools whose warnings frequently predict the downfall of the characters who ignore them, the so-called demented figures of Williams and their babbling affect their own destiny, usually adversely.

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The Role of Backstory in Acting: A Practice-Based Study on Marnoparant and 12 Angry Jurors

Manvi Rai & Charu Yadav & Ashish Dwivedi

Abstract

This paper explores the role of backstory in the acting process based on two theatre productions performed at the Central University of Punjab, Bathinda: Marnoparant by Surendra Verma and 12 Angry Jurors, adapted from Reginald Rose's 12 Angry Men. Backstory, or a character's imagined or interpreted past, has been an important area of focus for actor training in Indian and Western traditions. In Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the actor's presentation of *bhava* (emotional expression) and evocation of *rasa* (aesthetic experience) assume a development of an inner history. In Western practice, Konstantin Stanislavski, Lee Strasberg, and Sanford Meisner established backstory as a practice of emotional preparation, affective memory, and genuine impulse. The paper uses a qualitative practice-based study, combining observations of rehearsal, personal experience, and interviews with theatre practitioners. The findings reflect that backstory is not a tool to be raised; when necessary, it provides a fundamental structure that improves authenticity, maintains ensemble consistency, and builds empathy with the audience. It demonstrates through the performances of Marnoparant and 12 Angry Jurors how backstory was an effective 'bridge' between the text and actual performance. This study is qualitative and practice-led; it utilizes observational data gathered from rehearsals, examines performance notes, and interviews participants to indicate how backstory establishes preparation for the actor and potential reception of the performance from the audience.

Keywords: Acting, Backstory, Method Acting, Indian theatre, Actor process

Introduction

Theatre is one of humanity's oldest art forms, having existed longer than life. As a branch of the arts, it reflects life through performance, dialogue, and embodied storytelling. While the script provides a narrative structure to a performance, the backstory is a character's imagined or constructed life journey that brings the emotional truth into a performance. Acting without a backstory means movement is mechanical; acting with a backstory provides the actor with rich life creations to build nuanced and believable portrayals. In the field of Indian dramaturgy, Bharata's *Natyashastra* (Anoop 180) underscores *rasa* and *abhinaya* as the nerve of performance. Theatre has always reflected life, intertwining story and emotion through acting. Across Indian dramaturgy, the *Natyashastra* highlights *rasa* and *abhinaya* as central to performance, requiring the imagination to remember a character's interiority. Western practitioners, such as Stanislavski, Strasberg, and Meisner, have developed backstories to prepare actors emotionally and remain authentic to any character. Although these practices are widely extolled in acting training, normative approaches to building backstory are relatively informalized in Indian actor training. This research operates at the intersection of Indian and Western practices, through performance-based research, to understand how backstory and memory impact an actor's authentic performance, ensemble work, and audience development in contemporary theatre.

The *abhinayas* of *Angika* (physical), *Vachika* (verbal), *Aharya* (costuming), and *Sattvika* (inner) equally demand an imaginative process in which the performer inhabits an imagined inner world of the character. Similarly, in Western tradition, the advent of Stanislavski's (Stanislavski 52) system is referenced using the 'magic if' and emotional memory. Although this was very much conceptualized, and conceptualizing our inner imaginings of others is an epistemic act, post-Stanislavski, we see the further development of Method Acting (Strasberg 45) as formalized by Lee Strasberg (Strasberg 37), himself relying on one's memory, with Sanford Meisner's systems relying on truthful repetition (Meisner and Longwell 67) and impulse. Situated as a cross-cultural practice, this paper identifies backstory as an energetic way of enriching the authentic expressions of theatre. Using two play examples, *Marnoparant* and *12*

Angry Jurors, this research argues how backstory brings a performance alive from its scripted dialogue to its lived experience. Backstory refers to a character's fictional or imaginary life history within this context.

The backstory represents an important element of the process of constructing authentic performance. The study's outcome indicates that backstory is not simply an additional consideration.

It can provide organized scaffolding to create greater believability, facilitate ensemble work, and help shape emotional veracity. The study also advocates that the practice of constructing backstory should be formally integrated into the process of training actors working in Indian theatre, while also recognizing the value of practices from traditions such as *Natyashastra* as well as those of Western practice.

Objective

The term "backstory" includes distinct elements of the narratives about the performer's backstories. This investigation aims to unpack backstory into the actor's authenticity and the audience's sense of believability in *Marnoparant* and *12 Angry Jurors*. This research investigates how backstory building enables actors to internally embody the character's history in their rehearsals and performances, shaping their movement and relationships with one another and developing richer layers of meaning for the audience.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and practice-based and focuses on methods of research that include observation, engagement, and interviews. The researcher acted as a performer and observer in the two plays and made rehearsal notes. In the interviews with theatre practitioners (some alumni of the National School of Drama), the researcher adopted an expert witness stance to describe the practitioners' practices of constructing backstory. Thematic analysis illuminated how theatre artists used their personal lived experience, emotional memory, and improvisation to build backstory. This methodological approach demonstrates how the researcher can shed some light on the lived artistic processes of theatre practices and suggest conclusions that can often be missed in a purely

theoretical study, despite important considerations of circumstances and social engagements.

Data Collection

Findings were gathered from three different areas:

1. Observing rehearsals as the actors participated in improvisations and biographical explorations.
2. The actor reflection comments during feedback sessions as performers discussed the role backstory played in their preparation.
3. The audience reflection comments after the performance were analyzed as an impact indicator.

Below is a small selection of illustrative quotes.

Actor (Marnoparant): *“When I thought about the husband’s silent evenings after his wife’s death, the silence on stage had memory in all the pauses.”*

Actor (Juror 3): *“My troubled relationship with my father helped me locate the anger I had as Juror 3.”*

Audience: *“We felt the tension in the silences; it did not feel like acting, it felt like living.”*

Table 1: Audience Responses

To understand audience perceptions of the authenticity of performances, a sample of 50 audience members was surveyed.

Analysis

Marnoparant: Surendra Verma’s Marnoparant provides a rich exploration of grief, betrayal, and memory. On a basic level, the play represents a man struggling with his wife’s absence and the emotional burden created by what she did not say about her life. Nevertheless, the strength of the performance did not stem from the text so much as the backstory that the actors created to embody a nuance of silence and absence.

For example, the actor taking on the husband’s role established an inventive life, creating a backstory detailing a love affair. He fleshed out

a range of silent interactions that produced trust, established a shared reliance, and a lingering resentment that emerged from years of neglected relationships. Each silence was made tangible when imagined and situated within the context of distractions in pauses and silences that unfolded on stage. Pauses were not just empty pauses. They activated all the uninvited voices, gestures, and unfulfilled aspirations of the imaginary life he crafted for his character. One audience member commented, “We could feel the silence, as though it had a whole history.” This comment indicates the backstory (past) alters stillness (silence) into a form of action (unspoken dialogue). Similarly, the character of the lover makes a life that is more than the stereotype of the secret lover. Rather than a performance of burdened erotic improvisation, the lover actor could imagine lives layered with tenderness, patience, and friendship in addition to the rivalrous attachment between the wife and husband characters. Where the performance took the phrase ‘emotional vulnerability,’ ‘desire urgency’ could have represented the passion and lust associated with desire. In the place of the passionate aspects of desire, emotional vulnerability, and belonging were expressed in the lover’s performance. The absence of the wife’s character is brought into the space by the ensemble’s collective commitment to the invisible history of the wife. Each actor brings or imagines a piece of her life into the space, so the haunting of her absence resonates. Without these hallmarks, the play could have become a melodramatic task-oriented activity: grief as exaggerated movements, betrayal as shouting one another down. Instead, the backstory contributed a psychological realism that anchored performances in the present moment. Authentic backstory added weight to the tenderness of gestures to make absence as present as presence. The result was a performance that the audience experienced as lived memory unfolding before them, not theatre.

Angry Jurors: Reimagining Reginald Rose’s 12 Angry Men as 12 Angry Jurors offered a new but equally rich opportunity to delve into the jurors’ backstories. Unlike *Marnoparant*, which deals with personal grief, 12 Angry Jurors depicts a group confrontation in a jury room. The play, at face value, engages in deciding a legal case. However, the theatrical power of the play is borne from the individual histories that

each juror carries into the jury room, which is largely beneath the spoken text.

Actors approached their roles by crafting their characters' living histories. For example, Juror 3's indignation gained depth from the actor's choice to establish a fictional backstory of a fractious relationship with his son. Though never made explicit in performance, this element lived in every utterance, clenched fist, and loud voice. Juror 8's insistence on rationality took shape through the actor's imagined "disciplined childhood," where restraint and integrity were the virtues of childhood. The prejudice of Juror 10 became clearer when rooted in an invented biography of economic distress and associated social resentment. The rehearsal process included some improvisational exercises where the jurors acted out scenes from their imagined lives outside the courtroom, such as family dinners, disputes, and confrontations with oppression. These improvised scenes provided a nexus for the words and the actor's bodily orientation, gaze, and vocal quality. The actors explained that they had stopped "acting" concerning power, prejudice, or compassion; they inhabited the vault of the character's lives, off the stage, and into the jury room. The strength of the ensemble was particularly evident through the backstory. Rather than twelve people working independently, the imagined pasts of the jurors began to intersect. Juror 3's authoritarian stance was made even more interesting when, in contrast to Juror 8's quiet determination, it was not simply as a scripted foil, but because the biographies they made up suggested values that directly contradict one another.

This teamwork produced an ensemble that, as stated from audience response, felt spontaneous, real, and alive. Audience members did not experience a "set jury room," but in their words, a "real room full of real people." The strength of this performance did not come from elaborate props or beating the audience over the head with a heightened delivery style. However, the 'backstory' structure supported the ensemble, adding depth to the verbal exchange through subtext and assumptions, to create a 'social world' that felt real, dealing with contemporary Issues related to justice, bias, and the flawed human condition.

Rationale for Play Selection: The choice to work on Marnoparant

by Surendra Verma and 12 Angry Jurors, based on the play 12 Angry Men by Reginald Rose, stemmed from one of thematic leanings and balance to watch both plays cross-culturally and in dramatic tradition. Marnoparant is a significant contribution to contemporary Indian theatre. The themes and concepts of grief, betrayal, and silence yield many implications that rely on backstory. The action does not as heavily depend on external acts or plot, but rather shared exchanges, the inner lives of each character, making it excellent material for considering how enacted histories shape lived experience from silence, absence, and pauses. Marnoparant demonstrates this study of psychological realism through backstory.

For a Western classic, 12 Angry Jurors hinges on the collective moments among ensemble members. The play is performed in a confined space (the jury room), drawing its dramatic power from the latent histories of all twelve characters. The experiences, subjective views among the jurors, unspoken prejudices, moral dilemmas, and personal conflicts all affect the jurors' decisions during the play. Each juror matters; that is part of the reason to enhance their backstory. 12 Angry Jurors illustrates how backstory operates in relation to ensemble process.

Together, the two plays provide an interesting contrast; one is based on Indian dramaturgy, and the other is based on Western realism. This binary provides a template for this study to illustrate how backstory serves a universal purpose in the actor training experience and performance, especially in beginning to think about how backstory transcends cultures and stylistic modes.

Conclusion

This research supports the idea that backstory supports authenticity, emotional participation, and ensemble work. In both performances, the audience accepted the characters as believable, layered, and complex; that backstory continues to blur the line between script and 'live' performance, equal in legitimacy. Marnoparant highlights the significance of inner silence and psychological realism, while 12 Angry Jurors highlights the significance of ensemble dialogue and social identity. The two plays demonstrate that both Indian and Western practices lead to similar outcomes regarding unveiling the identity of backstory as transformative.

Backstory is not an adjunct rehearsal exercise but an essential part of the acting process. Its formal inclusion in the training of actors could enhance their training process even further, bringing insights from indigenous understandings such as the Natyashastra (Anoop 180) into conversation with contemporary approaches like Stanislavski (Stanislavski 52) and Meisner (Meisner and Longwell 23). Additional research should examine the role of backstory in the new fields of digital and experimental theatre to forward its applicability and essence to 21st-century performance.

Category	Marnoparant (%)	12 Angry Jurors (%)
Authenticity Felt	88	92
Emotional Engagement	85	90
Character Believability	82	95
Impactful Performance	87	93

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Overview of Lucknow Theatre: Development And Growth From The Time of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah

Ashish Dwivedi & Charu Yadav

Abstract

Drawing upon data from in-depth interviews with prominent theatre practitioners of Lucknow and a comprehensive review of relevant literature, this study explores the historical trajectory of Lucknow theatre from the era of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to the present day. It examines the foundational contributions of the Nawabi period, analyzing the early theatrical productions that established the groundwork for subsequent developments. Additionally, the study investigates the diverse range of theatrical forms, stage architecture, significant milestones, and cultural transformations that have shaped the evolution of theatre in Lucknow. A particular focus is placed on the golden age of Lucknow theatre, highlighting the contributions of various theatre groups and directors who played a pivotal role in elevating the city's theatrical tradition to national and international platforms. Furthermore, the research examines the establishment and impact of major cultural institutions that have contributed to the growth and sustenance of Lucknow theatre over time. Through this exploration, the paper provides insights into the enduring legacy and contemporary significance of Lucknow's rich theatrical heritage, emphasizing its historical importance and its lasting influence on modern performance art.

Keywords: Lucknow theatre, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, Theatre groups, Directors, Cultural Institutions.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, employing in-depth

interviews with eminent theatre practitioners and National Award-winning theatre directors of Lucknow. Additionally, the study involves field visits to various cultural institutions, libraries, and theatre spaces across the city to gather relevant data.

The research process is structured into three phases. In the initial phase, a comprehensive review of secondary sources—including books, articles, and scholarly papers related to the subject—has been conducted. The second phase focuses on the collection of primary data through interviews with key figures in Lucknow theatre, such as Gopal Sinha and Punit Asthana, as well as National Award-winning directors Lalit Singh Pokhariya and Surya Mohan Kulshreshtha. Furthermore, discussions were held with the families of Urmil Kumar Thapliyal and Raj Bisaria to gain deeper insights into their contributions. Visits were also made to prominent cultural institutions, including the Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Academy, Bhartendu Natya Academy, Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan, and Uttar Pradesh Urdu Sansthan, where interviews were conducted and archival materials, including photographs, were collected. In the final phase, all gathered data have been systematically analyzed to derive meaningful conclusions.

Introduction:

Lucknow and Awadh have always been famous for their distinct culture. The civilization of Awadh, especially the cultural environment of Lucknow, has been a subject of curiosity for the whole world. Lucknow is unique in its social form, language, behavior, literature, culture, manners, etiquette, songs, music, dance, drama, food, lifestyle, architecture, handicrafts, etc. The civilization associated with the name of Lucknow has the life of the Aryans, the color of the folk culture of Awadh, the boasting of the Sheikhs, the softness of the Nawabs, and the soldiers' swords.

The origin of Lucknow as a city is believed to be when Lord Ram returned after his exile in the forest and became King of Ayodhya. He gave this area as an estate to his brother Lakshman, who built his abode on a patch of elevated ground near the river with a deep cave, said to have led to Sheshnag (located on the track of Amarnath cave in Kashmir).

A small town came up around this elevated ground called “Lakshman Teela”, and the town came to be known as Lakshmanpur. The name of Lakshnavati from which Lucknow was born was Lakshmanpur in ancient times. Lakshmanpuri was not only the western fort of the Kosala region but was also considered an eternal pilgrimage due to its ancient existence. This holy place, bleached by Adi Ganga Gomti, was called ‘ChhotiKashi’ in that era. (Hamid, 2023)

The seeds of theatre in Lucknow were laid by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (Figure 1) in the mid-1800s. He was the eleventh and last king of Awadh. He was born in Lucknow on 30th July 1822, he ruled for 9 years. He was the patron of arts, he preserved and promoted various art forms. He had a great interest in dance and music. If we look at his contributions to music, He wrote and performed ghazals, is said to have composed many new ragas, and did a lot of work in promoting the music, especially thumri, a form prevalent in Uttar Pradesh. The classical dance of Uttar Pradesh, Kathak was preserved and promoted by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. He gave it a distinct shape, enhanced its artistic quality, added an aesthetic touch, enhanced it with rasa and bhava, and adorned its presentation with grandeur and splendor. (Mitra, 2017)



Figure 1. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah

He is also regarded as “the First playwright of Hindustani theatre”. He used to do experiments. So, as he was already working and promoting dance and music, he came up with the idea of adding dialogues to it and doing it in a way that has a combination of all, i.e. dance, music, mime, and dialogues with costumes and makeup for every specific character. If we want to compare it has somewhat similarities with today’s form of Dance-Drama, but still, that would be just one aspect. His plays had Shayari’s, ghazals, classical music, and dance, which showcased the rich heritage, art, and culture of Uttar Pradesh. It could be said to be the birth of professional drama or theater in Lucknow. (Bhatt, 2006)

The first play, which happened in Lucknow theatre, was “Kissa Radha Kanahiya Ka,” inspired by the tales of Radha-Krishna and directed by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah himself. This was staged in Kesarbagh in a big mansion named “Rahas Manzil”, which could be considered the first Hindustani Theatre Hall. Other famous plays he directed were dramatized versions of poems i.e. “Darya-i-Tashsq” in 1850, “Afsane-i-isba” in 1851, and “Bahar-i-Ulfat” in 1852. The sets were often grand and ornate, reflecting the opulence of the Nawabi court, and had intricate designs and vibrant colors. As the plays were performed during the daytime, there was not much need for specific lighting, which is used nowadays in productions. The language of the plays was Hindustani. The Production style of these plays was vibrant and elaborate and did not just have mere dialogues, there was a mix of classical Indian forms like kathak dance and Urdu poetry, thumri songs, movements of mime, costumes, and makeup specific to each character, for example- if a person is playing Krishna, he would be painted blue, and given a dhoti, with the accessories of Krishna i.e. Mor Pankh, flute, etc. He would have a specific way of walking and saying dialogues according to Krishna. (Praveen, 2002)

The stage in which these plays were performed at that time were known as “Shahi Stage” or “The Royal Stage” and their group was known as “Shahi Natya Dal” Or “The Royal Theatre Group”. Mostly the plays written and directed by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and his royal members were performed on this stage, and this “Shahi Natya Dal” consists of artists hired permanently by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, they

were given training in classical dance and music along with various aspects of drama and acting. These artists were paid and had great respect and admiration among the people of the town.

One of the most famous plays of that time was “Indra Sabha,” which was written by Syed Agha Hasan Amanat Lakhnawi and first staged in 1853. It is written entirely in verse, with the core theme being a romance between a prince and a fairy. The play is performed using operatic elements such as fireworks and masks. This play became so famous during that time that it was also played by local people around every corner of Lucknow. The stage that was set up by the local people used tent material i.e. wooden tables, bamboo sticks, etc., and later came to be known as the “Awami stage” or the “Common People’s Stage”. This was the start of professional theatre among common people here. (Sinha, 2022)

So, whether it was the Shahi stage or the Awami Stage, the productions started happening regularly. We can say the seed of professional and modern Lucknow theatre was planted at that time. More plays were taken up with inspiration from mythological stories, our epics Ramayana and Mahabharat, and folklore. At the end of the 19th century, while theater in Lucknow was visible on the one hand, organized or unorganized parties and troupes staged plays on temporary stages in the city’s different corners, on the other hand, private theater companies were also staging popular plays in Parsi style at various places in the city. Along with the increasing interest in theatre, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the participation of educated and well-educated people in the field of theater also increased intending to give impetus to the local theatrical activities of Lucknow city along with determining the systematic outline, the establishment of theater groups was started. A series of plays based on social reform were played against the evils through theater groups, due to which Hindi theater emerged as a medium of entertainment as well as a powerful medium to express anything. Initial theatre groups were “Prabodhini Parishad Natya Sanstha” in 1902, and “Hindu Union Club” in 1908 by Rajaram Nagar, Father of famous writer Amritlal Nagar.

Initially, the plays were performed in famous colonies, they used to make the stage from tent material i.e. beds, sticks, etc., but as part of being busy streets there were many distractions for the public so slowly, they moved to the rooftop of big mansions, there was enough space for audiences to sit and peacefully enjoy the show, but there were also space restrictions and not many people were able to watch the show. After a few more years of theatre, the performance space moved to large open grounds, where a big stage was made using multiple layers of wooden materials the whole of the stage was covered with clothes and there was very huge space to accommodate a large number of people, but staging a play on an open ground has its advantages and disadvantages, sometimes there could be weather conditions, and the open space would have sound problems, etc.

So, after all these theatres came into halls, a base for future auditoriums. The plays started happening in big halls, where all external barriers like rain, bad weather, and sound problems were minimized, and the audience could have a much better experience of watching plays. Some famous halls of that time were ‘The Prasad Memorial Hall’ in Aminabad, ‘The Bengali Club’ at Hevat Road, ‘Railway Institute Club Hall’ in Chitvapur, ‘Tilak Hall Nagar Nigam’ in Lalbagh, ‘Chatar Manzil’ (Figure 2), etc. (Sinha, 2022)



Figure 2. Chatar Manzil, Lucknow

Folk Theatre

During that time Ramlila, (Figure 3) one of the major folk forms of Uttar Pradesh was also happening around almost every part of the state during the Dussehra celebration in September and October, people from all castes, classes, and even religions gather in most north Indian cities and villages to re-enact the story of Ram's victory over Ravana. The performances, which are typically coordinated by neighborhood committees and funded by donations from the community, vary widely in terms of scale and style but also have some things in common. They are typically not offered on a single day but rather over a period of nine to thirty-one days in a row. They traverse the surrounding areas rather than being performed in one spot. The Ramcharitmanas serves as their foundation. Ram, Sita, and Ram's brothers Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughna are revered as gods through the enactment. Probably the most famous among the many hundreds of Ramlilas in north India is the one at Ramnagar, located across the Ganga from Varanasi, and the capital of the Maharajas of Banaras since the mid-eighteenth century. Its unique intensity is affected by the 200-year-old patronage it has enjoyed from the Maharajas, whose very visible participation confers upon it both handsome material assistance and great religious significance. (Gargi, 1991)



Figure 3. Ramlila, folk form of Uttar Pradesh

One other major folk form present is Rasleela. This traditional folk theater was registered in UNESCO's intangible historical list in 2008. It started in the 16th century when Mahatmas like Vallabhacharya and Hitharivansh etc. re-established the popular Shingara-oriented Raas with religion and dance and gave its dance to the Rasik Shiromani Shri Krishna. Being united, he was overwhelmed by the name of Rasleela. Rasleela is a major part of folk theatre. During the Bhakti period, the love affairs of Radha and Krishna were displayed in which spirituality was predominant. Their basis were the verses and hymns of the poets Surdas and Ashtachhap, in which there was both the joy and pleasure of music and poetry. (Dwivedi, 2021)

Commercial theatre was also happening on a large scale at that time, particularly "Parsi theatre", many theatre companies visited Lucknow and ran their shows for many months altogether like Victoria Theatre Company, Alfred Theatre Company, Zoroastrian Theatrical Club, and others. In 1953, Prithvi Raj Kapoor also came with his group to Lucknow to perform his shows "Dewar", "Pathaan" and "Shakuntala" and these were performed in Mayfair Cinema Hall, Hazratganj and Jagat cinema hall, Aminabad. Other plays performed by the Prithviraj Kapoor group include "Ahuti", "Kisan", "Paisa" and "Kalakaar". One famous director of Parsi-style theatre from Lucknow was 'Taki Raza', he was also the first one in Lucknow's Ramlila to introduce women actors on stage.

The First World War gave a new turn to social life and people started focusing on the presentation of social, political, and nationalist plays, leaving aside imaginary stories. After Hussaini Mian and Zarif Lakhnavi, the Urdu plays of Agha Hashr Kashmiri also joined this stream and with this gradually the boat of Parsi-style plays started sinking. Maiden Theatrical Company took the first step in turning theaters towards cinema when it started producing its films in 1922. Despite the new demands and new forms of drama and extractive styles, Lucknow has given good protection to traditional plays and drama for which all the theater groups are making equal efforts. Apart from these, many theatre groups were also getting established at that time, like the Indian People Theatre Association (IPTA), which was established in 1943 in Mumbai, and 1943 only Lucknow's branch was established by the contribution of Dr

Rasheed Zahaan, Babulal Verma and Gokul Rastogi, and the first play by IPTA Lucknow was “Parde Ke Peeche” performed at Railway Institute Club Hall. Other major theatre groups of that time were “Kala Mandir”, “Madan Mohan Rastogi Hindu Association”, “Lucknow Natya Sangha”, “Sanskritik Rangmanch”, “Natraj Bharti” and “Rashtriya Natya Parishad”.

Golden Age of Lucknow Theatre

The 1960's-1980's is considered as the golden period for Lucknow theatre. This was the time when Lucknow theatre flourished in its full glory. There were many initiatives for promoting theatre-related activities by the Government and people who were involved in theatre. The first important step in this direction was the organizing of state-level Drama competitions (Annual Drama Festival) by the Uttar Pradesh State Information Commission, this initiative was possible because of the efforts of K.B Chandra. Awards were given for best play and performances (Shakuntala award), the performances mostly happened in the large open ground of the office only, with necessary arrangements for lights and sound. The first competition included 6 plays, and one notable thing was that the first production of Mohan Rakesh's “Aashadka Ek din” happened at this festival. This initiative lasted for almost 12 years till 1969, and because of this people got the taste of varieties in theatre, they got to explore plays by different directors, exploring different cultures and different issues. This was the first major step in the promotion of modern Lucknow theatre.

In 1963, “Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natya Bharti Sansthan” later known as “Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Academy” was started by the State Government for the evolution and development of Art forms (Dance, Theatre, Music) and it was in a way a revolution for Lucknow theatre, because of its schemes and initiatives, whether it was the “State Drama Festival”, “Awadh Sandhya”, “Hindi Playwriting Competition”, “Festivals for promotion of folk theatre” or to recent initiatives like “Raaskala Manch”, “Theatre workshops” etc.

One other major thing was the building of one of the finest Auditoriums of Lucknow of that time “Ravindralaya” on the 100th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. The “Ravindralaya” of Lucknow, constructed

in 1964, is the only one in Uttar Pradesh, It has a seating capacity of around 800. Apart from this, it also has a mini auditorium with it, known as “Mini-Ravindralaya”. These became a hub for all theatre activities in the town.

In 1966, Raj Bisaria (Figure 4) known as the father of modern Lucknow theatre established his theatre group “Theatre Arts Workshop”, the first play under it was “Othello” by Raj Bisaria himself. He believed in the training of Actors, he said that actors must rigorously work on their craft to constantly improve themselves, they need to go through the process, they need discipline and commitment, and this was somewhere the reason behind naming his group Theatre Arts “Workshop”. Initially, Raj Bisaria’s productions were mostly in English, and it gave birth to English theatre in Lucknow. He is considered as the pioneer of modern Indian theatre in North India. In 1969, he went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts for drama training, one of very few artists India to get this opportunity. (Others like Ebrahim Alkazi, Habib Tanveer etc.) One of the major accomplishments of his theatre journey was that he made North Indian theatre aware of theater training and the sensitivity of theatrical discipline and refinement.



Figure 4. Raj Bisaria

Then in 1975, one other major thing happened for Lucknow theatre due to his efforts, he established an institute for theatre training “Bhartendu Natya Kendra”, now popularly known as “Bhartendu Natya Academy”. Initially, it was a part-time course that used to run in the evening time, in 1977, it became a 1-year full-time diploma course and after a few years a 2-year full-time diploma residential course and from 2023 the course has become 2-year full-time master’s degree course. It became the first drama training institute in the State, the only other institute in the country being the National School of Drama, in Delhi.

The major theatre groups of this time include “Darpan Lucknow”

established in 1971 by Prof Satyamurti. This group is active till today, the first production under this group was “Khamosh Adalat Jari Hai” written by Vijay Tendulkar and directed by Ram Govind. This group used to invite directors from outside and has invited directors like BansiKaul, B.V Karanth, Mudrakshasa, etc. One of the most Prominent personalities associated with this group was “Dr. Urmil Kumar Thapliyal”, he was one of the most prominent directors of Lucknow Theatre. He has directed more than 150 plays including dance-dramas, nautanki, musicals, full length plays etc. Till now, more than 500 performances of these plays have been held in different states of the country. He was the founding member of Darpan, directed many plays for the group, and took Darpan and Lucknow theatre to great heights, he was well known for the fusion style of Nautanki, which he made popular a lot, he revived this art form and mixed it with contemporary themes and created something very magical on the stage.



Figure 5. Play Harish Channarki Ladai, directed by Dr Urmil Kumar Thapliyal

He says “Nautanki has its classical form, which does not need the ‘approval’ of the king. Nautanki, despite society’s neglect and contempt, survived as a necessary evil in the affluent society. It can be used in experimental theater only when the director with modern theater awareness is familiar with the soul and essence of the drama and on the other

hand, enthusiasm for modern consciousness is aroused among the professional drama artists. There cannot be any third option.” (Thapliyal, 2000) Some milestone plays of this group include “Yahoodiki Ladki” and “Harish Channarki Ladai” (Figure 5) directed by Urmil Kumar Thapliyal, “Hayavadan” and “Evam Indrajeet” by B.V Karanth. In 1978 it organized a “Darpan Natya Mela” in which all the branches of Darpan came with its play and was a huge success and a treat for audiences.

One other major group of that time was “MEGHDOOT” by Harimohan Samson and Ranjit Kapoor. It was known for its experiments in theatre at that time. The first play by this group was “Ras Gandharva” directed by Ranjit Kapoor. Then an experiment “Collage” which was many different poems clubbed together and performed. Similarly, today one such form is known as “Kahanika Rangmanch” which is dramatizing and performing stories on stage, which in India has been started by Devendra Raj Ankur. Some important members of the groups were Surya Mohan Kulshrestha and Atamjeet Singh. Many theatre personalities were called from outside to direct productions for the group like Devendra Raj Ankur, Bhanu Bharti, Pankaj Kapoor, Ratan Thiyam, Raghuvir Yadav etc. The group is not active now, but the members of the group have done a lot of work that time and continue to do so today. Surya Mohan Kulshrestha, was one of the prominent member of the group. His productions have been praised on many National and International stages, like Bharat Rang Mahotsav, Kalidas Samaroh, Lucknow Mahotsav etc. His plays have been performed in countries like Norway, Finland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, America, Canada, Pakistan etc. He has also been associated with IPTA as president in Lucknow IPTA and was the member of National council of IPTA. He is known for his unique sense of direction, his play “Bhagavadajukkam” (Figure 6), “Ramlila” and others have represented India on many National and International platforms and has given Lucknow theatre a lot of recognition. Atamjeet Singh, known for his Nautanki style has preserved and promoted this form and done an exceptional work of reviving this form in its original style and structure on stage.

One major event happened in the history of Lucknow theatre was the start of performing plays in Lucknow Mahotsav, i.e. the start of



Figure 6. Play Bhagavadajukkam, directed by Surya Mohan Kulshreshtha

“Lucknow Natya Samaroh” by Shashank Bahuguna and Siddharth Pakrasi, and many other active theatre groups of that time like Meghdoot, Darpan, Sanket, TAW, Lakrees, Nakshatra etc. This festival had few major specialties like the plays were ticketed, a strict discipline was followed for the timing, and the plays performed under this festival were usually top plays of the respective theatre groups, e.g. “King Oedipus” and “Dulari Bai” by Surya Mohan Kulshreshtha under Meghdoot, “Dr. Faustus” by Shashank Bahuguna under Lakrees, “Garbo” by Raj Bisaria under TAW, “Gufaayein” by Dr Urmil Kumar Thapliyal under Darpan etc. This festival’s name was later changed to Theatre Forum and was active till 1985. This was the time when IPTA was once again revived and many other major theatre groups were formed like “NIPA”, “Yayavar Rangmandal”, “Manchkriti”, “Bhartiyam” etc. This was the time when Surya Mohan Kulshreshtha’s play “Bhagavadajjukam” represented India in Norway (1991), this was the first play from Lucknow theatre to travel internationally.

One major thing about theatre during this time was that it was more like of a “Shaukiya Rangmanch” or “Amateur theatre” i.e. the people who were doing it, were not dependent on theater alone for their livelihood. They were busy with some other business throughout the day, which

had nothing to do with theatre. These were those people who were educated in their respective subjects through the modern education system and with the help of that skill, they were securing the means of their livelihood in society. For e.g.- Raj Bisaria was teaching in Lucknow university, Surya Mohan Kulshrestha was working in LIC, Urmil Kumar Thapliyal was working in Door darshan, etc. they were busy with their work during the day and gathered in the evening. such theater which is done by those people who do not depend on theater for their livelihood, nor do they spend all their time in theatre as seen earlier in classical theater and Parsi theatre. The same situation could be seen in folk theater also for at least six months in a year. Today the word amateur is taken in a negative sense, i.e. theater which is poor in quality. But if we go into the history of amateur theatre, we will see that whatever artistic, experimental and quality work has been done in this field, it has been possible only in amateur theatre. The main reason for this is that the basis of amateur theater is not related to financial gain but pure artistic activity. That is why he can take the biggest risk, whereas for commercial theatre, its financial gain comes first and anything else later. (Ankur, 2021)

During this time, Children's theatre/Baal Rangmanch (Figure 7) was also started in Lucknow on a major scale, the major groups involved with this were "Yayavar Rangmandal", "Nisarg" etc, and they used to conduct workshops across the city. Lalit Singh Pokhariya has taken a lot of workshops for children's theatre and written and directed plays for them, one major aspect of his work was always focused on children. Similarly, others include Md. Hafeez, Sanjay Degalurakar, Ashutosh Dwivedi, Sunil Chaturvedi, Rama Arun Trivedi, Chitra Mohan, etc. Gyaneshwar Mishra Gyani is credited with the start of Theatre in Education in Lucknow and has done very versatile work in the field of theatre.

When the 21st century started, at that time television and films were becoming powerful mediums of media, on which the availability of many channels of news, information/history, and religious and entertainment-related programs started in television. It became convenient for the viewer to watch the program of his choice easily on that TV



Figure 7. Lalit Singh Pokhariya conducting a theatre workshop for school children

channel. Many popular entertainment serials started coming on the channels due to which due to increase in demand for artists and related technical fields, the attraction of earning name and money along with glamor in this media led to the migration of many artists of the city towards Mumbai. Many artists associated with the theater of Lucknow had reached Mumbai by this time, some of them were successful in getting regular work and today are well-known names in the TV industry, some have made other fields related to film/TV programs their source of livelihood. As a result of all this, the shortage of male and female artists was once again felt in Lucknow theatre but as it has been said many times “Theatre is a mother art form, over the course of history, many times it was seen that the interest of people in theatre started decreasing, but theatre has always stood up. Nothing can replace theatre; it is a live-performance medium and has its magic.” (Sinha, 2022)

In 2000 the major theatre groups were continuously doing theatre productions, many productions from Lucknow theatre went to National and International festivals like “Bharat Rang Mahotsav”, “Peerzada World Performing Arts Festival” etc. The other remarkable thing that happened

during this period was that the local theater institutions, mainly Manchkriti, IPTA, TAW, Yayavar Rangamandali, NIPA Rangamandali, etc. started ticketing the performances of their theatrical productions, and this tradition was welcomed among the audience, and it helped to make a healthy step forward towards professional theatre in Lucknow. BNA Repertory was started, and it helped the artists to become full-time involved in theatre without much worrying about financial problems and was a major step for professional theatre in Lucknow. Sangeet Natak Academy was actively involved in schemes related to the promotion of theatre, BhartenduNatya Academy with much-needed training for theatre among students.

Today there are many Auditoriums like “Rai Umanath Bali Auditorium” in Qaesarbagh, Bhartendunatya academy’s 2 auditoriums i.e. “B.M Shah Auditorium” and “Thrust Auditorium”, Sangeet Natak Academy’s 2 auditoriums i.e. “Sant Gadge Ji Maharaj Auditorium” (Figure 8) and “Valmiki Rangshala”, other Auditoriums in Ganna Sansthan, Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan, etc. These are auditoriums that are upgraded technically with modern lighting and sound systems.



Figure 8. Sant Gadge Ji Maharaj Auditorium, UPSNA, Lucknow

Conclusion

The evolution of Lucknow theatre has been remarkable, progressing from its humble origins—where performances took place on rooftops or street corners—to the sophisticated, technologically advanced

auditoriums of today. The transition from intimate gatherings to fully occupied auditoriums reflect the growing recognition and appreciation of theatre as an art form. In its early stages, performances were constrained by natural light due to the absence of adequate nighttime illumination; however, contemporary theatre employs advanced lighting techniques to create diverse temporal and spatial settings.

Furthermore, theatre in Lucknow has shifted from ephemeral, one-time performances to productions that now tour nationally and internationally, with numerous repeated stagings. The resurgence and preservation of folk theatre forms, once on the brink of obscurity, further exemplify this transformation, as these traditions are now actively promoted and celebrated. Additionally, what was once considered a mere pastime has evolved into a viable full-time profession.

Today, Lucknow theatre embodies the city's creative ingenuity, historical significance, and cultural richness. Through their visionary leadership, innovative approaches, and steadfast dedication to artistic excellence, directors, theatre institutions, and performance groups have played a pivotal role in shaping Lucknow theatre into a thriving and dynamic cultural entity. This artistic legacy continues to inspire, engage, and captivate audiences globally. Recognizing and appreciating the achievements of Lucknow theatre contributes to a deeper understanding of India's vast and intricate performing arts tradition, as well as its long-standing legacy of artistic innovation and creative brilliance.

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Revisiting Utpal Dutt's *The Great Rebellion*: History, Class and the Feminine Hero

Naren Mondal

Abstract

This paper reinterprets Utpal Dutt's *The Great Rebellion* (*Mahavidroh*) through the intersecting lenses of history, class struggle, and feminist resistance. Set against the backdrop of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, which Dutt views not merely as a historical episode but as an unfinished revolutionary process, the play challenges bourgeois historiography by reclaiming the uprising as a proletarian revolt. While critics accuse Dutt of distorting facts, he insists that revolutionary theatre must transcend empirical accuracy to illuminate historical truth from a Marxist perspective. This study explores how *The Great Rebellion* constructs class consciousness through figures like Heera Singh and Lachman Singh while simultaneously foregrounding women as radical agents of change. The courtesan Waziran and the war-hardened Kasturi emerge not as passive onlookers but as catalytic forces who galvanize male soldiers into action—through scathing rhetoric, ideological clarity, and direct physical participation. Waziran dismantles patriarchal and colonial moralities alike, weaponizing her marginality as a Muslim prostitute to expose both British hypocrisy and Indian complicity. Kasturi, echoing Brecht's *Mother Courage*, embodies the paradox of war as both devastation and sustenance. Together, these women redefine heroism, shifting it from the battlefield to the realm of consciousness and speech. By placing subaltern women at the ideological core of rebellion, Dutt subverts the patriarchal-nationalist framework of historical drama and proposes a feminist proletarian historiography. The paper argues that

The Great Rebellion is not only a call for anti-imperialist struggle but also a manifesto for gendered revolution from below.

Keywords: Utpal Dutt, Marxist Theatre, 1857 Rebellion, Feminist Heroism, Class Struggle

The play *The Great Rebellion* or *Mahavidorha*, first performed as *Tota* in Bengali at the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS) auditorium in Delhi on February 10, 1973, by People's Little Theatre, under the direction of the playwright Utpal Dutt, portrays the historic Sepoy Mutiny, also known as the First War of Independence, which took place in 1857. In this work, like many of his other plays, Dutt skillfully blends fiction with historical fact, creating revolutionary characters such as Heera Singh and Lachman Singh.

Critics have often accused Utpal Dutt of distorting historical facts and deviating from the truth in his works. Dutt argues that the bourgeois class in India has never presented the true history; instead, they have consistently offered a twisted version to the masses, even in school textbooks, to perpetuate the myth of India as a peaceful nation with peaceful revolutionary struggles throughout its ancient history. In order to remind people of their glorious revolutions and inspire them towards armed struggle, he employs historical events and facts in his plays, offering a fresh perspective and interpretation.

Dutt defends these charges in his essay "What is to be done?" published in *On Theatre*, using his play *Kallol* (*The Wave*) as an example. In "Kallol," the rebel Khyber refuses to surrender despite relentless air attacks by the British Royal Air Force, whereas historical accounts indicate that Khyber capitulated after the second air raid. The play portrays Khyber as fighting on, declaring defiantly that he will not surrender. Dutt asserts that for the bourgeoisie, Khyber's surrender marks the end of the mutiny, but for the proletariat, it signifies merely the beginning of a long struggle for freedom. To him, the surrender of Khyber is a historical fact but not the ultimate truth. He states, "the truth includes the historical process that Khyber unleashed" (Dutt, *On Theatre* 14-15).

In a 1989 interview published in *Shudrak* theatre magazine, Dutt expressed that one of the primary purposes of theatre is to accurately present history through the lens of Marxist thought. The contemporary Communists, he argues, are tasked with upholding the great tradition of revolutionary struggles of the past. They must internalize this legacy of anti-imperialist revolution; otherwise, their enemies will label them as traitors and seek to marginalize them (Mukhopadhyay 157). Samik Bandyopadhyay, in the introduction to *The Great Rebellion*, notes,

Fictional characters like Heera Singh, Lachman Singh, Kasturi, and Waziran typologically represent the forces and passions that erupted into rebellion and sustained it against the heaviest odds. Dutt's prologue connects the long process of colonial exploitation, military violence, and torture to the dawn of organized resistance

(Dutt, *Three Plays*, 125-26).

According to Karl Marx, the revolution of 1857 is classified as a National Revolution, one in which landowners participated equally alongside the working class. This event stands as the largest anti-imperialist revolution in the world during the nineteenth century (Mukhopadhyay, 156). For Utpal Dutt, this theme undoubtedly provides a powerful impetus for a play aimed at rallying the masses for revolutionary struggles. This paper will analyze the storyline of the play, exploring how class struggles are depicted and the role of women in the revolutionary ideology.

The play opens in the 1840s, highlighting the brutal treatment of Indian weavers by the British, who see the weavers' fine cloth production as a threat to the British cotton industry. Weaver Budhan and his son Bishen attempt to resist the oppressive measures enacted by the colonial rulers, but their efforts are in vain. In a shocking display of oppression, Budhan's right thumb—the very finger he uses to weave—is severed as punishment for his defiance against the British. A significant point arises early in the narrative when Frazer, an agent of the East India Company, arrogantly proclaims, “India is an agricultural country. What does it need workmen for?” (Dutt, *Three Plays* 142). This statement reflects their intent to obliterate the foundation of Indian civilization and erase its history. Panjakush poignantly counters Frazer's assertion, stating,

Do you think this cloth grows in the fields? Do you believe that the Cashmere shawl and the Dhaka muslin can be found in the paddy fields? You are destroying the manufacturing fabric of this country, reducing it to absolute dependence on agriculture. You seek to turn back our history by centuries and obliterate our civilization (Dutt, *Three Plays* 142).

The play progresses to depict various wars across different historical periods alongside the evolution of Lachman Singh, also known as Kalu, the son of Bishen Singh. Scene 3 focuses on the developments at the Meerut barracks, where English officers demonstrate the use of new Enfield rifles to the sepoys. They attempt to assure the soldiers that the grease used in the cartridges is not derived from cow or pig fats, but from alternative materials, thereby showcasing their reliance not only on oppression but also on the systematic brainwashing of the native population. Businessmen like Tularam, who openly support the English officers, betray the cause of the revolution, which Dutt consistently criticizes as a betrayal by the middle-class bourgeois.

Even after independence, with the Congress Government failing to meet the public's expectations, many began to believe that the government was primarily serving the interests of foreign capitalists. Consequently, government plans faltered, rendering life intolerable for the common people. In this context, landowners and moneylenders began to exert their power more ruthlessly over society. Collaborating with the government and police, they silenced the voices of the masses. Satya Bandyopadhyay, in his book *Utpal Dutt and His Theatre*, discusses the duality of Indian rulers, noting,

Though the government spoke of peace and lectured against the use of atomic powers, it was providing aid to American soldiers in Korea... The government allowed French planes to use Indian airports, and the Indian Navy operated under British captains as part of the British Navy (15).

Amidst this scenario, Dutt recognized that theatre could serve as a potent medium for protesting against such exploitation. He dedicated himself to bringing theatre to the public, writing and directing plays

tirelessly. This particular play illustrates a form of ideological and armed revolution. Dutt often critiques Indian writers who fill their works with praises of English figures. In an essay titled *Shikar* ("The Root"), he reproached writer Nirod Chowdhury for glorifying Robert Clive in his biography, which condemned Indians as uncultured and brutal. This perspective undermines the long-standing anti-imperialist and freedom struggles in India, implying that if Indians were portrayed as ancient beasts, and the English as their civilizers, then the two-century-long struggle against colonial oppression becomes meaningless.

Dutt perceives the government as complicit with imperialist foreign powers, suggesting a deliberate attempt to erase India's true history. His attack on this cultural barbarity forms the play's central focus. Firstly, he showcases the revolution against foreign rulers, and secondly, he exposes the princes and businessmen who betrayed the cause for their own benefit. The conversations between Lachman Singh and Heera Singh reveal the brutal treatment inflicted by British officers on innocent Indians, including the exploitation of native women. The native soldiers are consistently left to fight while the British reap the rewards. The stark disparity in wages between British and Indian sepoy is illustrated through the dialogue:

Govind: You troopers are different from us. Wages make the difference. We receive seven rupees a month, while the troopers earn 23.

Parantap: And the Tommy begins his regimental life at 40 rupees a month. But who has been fighting all the battles in Hindustan? Us, not them! I say, down with the Christian oppressor!(Dutt, *Three Plays* 151)

The disparity extends to the food provided, with Muhabbat ironically remarking, "I'm convinced that the English officer's old boots aren't thrown away. They are sent to our kitchens and made into bread" (Dutt, *Three Plays* 151). These grievances only heightened the frustrations among the Indian soldiers. Accounts of battles recounted by Indian soldiers reveal the vulnerability of the British in warfare:

Nawab: The English have no sense of fair play. We went to fight in Sindh under General Napier. At Miani, we charged the enemy lines, only to find that not a single English Tommy had followed us. We won the battle nonetheless, but upon returning to base, we learned that only the white soldiers would share in the spoils—not the blacks.

Heera: They didn't fight anywhere except in Afghanistan, and look what happened there. The entire British army, save for a doctor, was annihilated. The Afghans demonstrated that if you kick them hard enough, the Tommy will run. (Dutt, *Three Plays* 157-58)

So the confidence was there and the planning too, was going on in the camps where Indians were put up. Bakht Khan, Heera, Muhabbat and others were planning the revolt since a long time. But Lachman in this revolution becomes a complex character whom all the soldiers are unable to understand. He stands out, as if, as the human outcome of the good and evil acts of the English. In his childhood he lost his parents and fled. He was brought up by an English General John Nicholson, who saves a widow from being burnt alive. Seeing the torture perpetrated on the native Indians by the English officers, we find he aligns himself to the cause of revolution, yet he has a mixed response toward the British and this mixed response is very symbolic in this context. As Samik Bandyopadhyay points out in the Introduction of the play:

Lachman represents the crisis of his time and his generation, even as he identifies with the cause of the revolution against the Europeans and sees, at the same time, 'the fundamental revolution in the state of Asia' that the Europeans bring with them as 'the unconscious tools of history'. (Dutt, *Three Plays* 129)

He protests when other soldiers call Waziran prostitute, as he thinks that the society itself is responsible for the fact that she is forced to follow her profession.

Parantap: What's all this? Are there no limits to profligacy here! Entertaining a prostitute inside the barracks!

Lachman: What did you say?

Parantap: I'm asking you—what have you to do with that girl? She serves the English officers as a prostitute.

Lachman would have hit him if the sepoy, roaring with laughter, did not get between them.

Lachman: You drive those girls to sell themselves, and now sit in judgement over her? You lock them up in harems without education. Brahmans marry 100, 150 times. By what right do you judge her? (Dutt, *Three Plays* 161)

Lachman's relationship with Waziran is also very important in shaping the character of Lachman. Waziran is the courtesan who entertains the English officers. She has a great sense of understanding and is gifted with a powerful tongue. There are historical proofs, as Samik Bandyopadhyay also admits in the Introduction, that the local people of Meerut instigated the sepoy to rebellion to take revenge against those 85 Indian sepoys who were humiliated by the British officers for refusing to take the cartridges of Enfield rifles (Dutt, *Three Plays* 129). Women also taunted the sepoys for their cowardice. Bandyopadhyay says:

All this Dutt incorporates in the drama of the prostitute Waziran whipping the sepoys with her tongue to an unplanned and spontaneous upsurge even as a mutiny was being planned—shows in the preceding sequence where Subedar Bakht Khan—visits Heera Singh in disguise with instructions for preparation for the revolt. (Dutt, *Three Plays* 130)

When the sepoys abuse her for her profession, she instantly replies, "Selling one's body is a crime but you think nothing of selling your religion? . . . White man's slave, licking pig fat to serve your Christian master —aren't you ashamed?" (Dutt, *Three Plays* 161). She knows that religion is the predominant issue. She has seen people not to eat at the same place, not to drink from the same pot in the barracks. So she taunts them. She takes the advantage of her profession, saying, "Do you know in whom man confides most? Not in his wife, but in his mistress. There's no end to what I've heard for the last one month or so. Want to hear it?" (Dutt, *Three Plays* 162). And the result is instantly there.

All the sepoys scream out in revolt, way before it was planned. It is Waziran, in whom Lachman Singh confides the truth of his birth and it is she, who removes the veil of illusion from the eyes of Lachman Singh about the apparent good deeds of the Englishmen.

Waziran: But answer me: Why do you think the English want to save Indian widows from burning? You think they really care about black women? Is it possible? My body is nightly mangled by hungry Englishmen. No one knows better than I in what contempt they hold us. After enjoying me, they are overcome by shame and they wash themselves all over, openly insulting me. Don't you realize why they are trying to destroy our religion?

Lachman: How can they destroy something that is already in ruins?

Waziran: It would not be so powerful if it were in ruins. The Englishmen wish to break the back of the natives, so we lie happily at their feet and never raise our heads again. Hunger weakens the body—an outraged religion weakens the mind. With the nation prostrate, they can rob it without hindrance". (Dutt, *Three Plays* 164)

She knows very well that the English are trying to destroy the religion of the Indians to destroy the very base of the society and by doing so they can easily control them. As analysed by Samik Bandyopadhyay, if Lachman Singh stands for the generation of his time, then there is no denying that it is Waziran who takes the responsibility to make them see the actual reality behind the facade of colonial rule. Throughout the play we see her teasing and taunting Lachman for insulting her. Be it against Prince Mirza Mughal or any English officer, she taunts Lachman every time to fight. When Mirza tries to arrest her for not going with him to dance in his house, Lachman resists:

Lachman: She is a holy warrior. If you try to arrest her, I shall resist.

Mirza: You are a common sepoy. You dare resist the Commander in Chief?

Lachman: Without question.

Mirza: Whats your name?

Lachman: What's yours?

Mirza: (*draws his sabre*) I have been waiting to test the steel of this Elichpur sabre for some time. (*Throws his handkerchief to the ground.*)

Muhabbat: Lachman, don't pick that handkerchief up. That man is the greatest swordsman in Hindustan.

Waziran: Pick up the handkerchief, Lachman, then run him through with your sword. He has insulted me.

Lachman picks up the handkerchief

Mirza: You will die beautifully.

They fight. It is obvious that Lachman is no match for Mirza.

Waziran: Kill him, Lachman. In the stomach. Off with his head. Kill him, batter him. (Dutt, *Three Plays* 189)

This conversation shows how knowingly she instigates Lachman into a fight with Mirza to whom Lachman is no match. This is the power of her tongue. And she is greatly influential in this play. Not only ideologically— she takes part in the war physically. She calls herself a 'holy warrior'. She knows it's not possible for men only to achieve freedom/success; everyone has to take part in this war only then this would be possible to make a change, may be social or at least psychological.

Nawab: A woman in the middle of the battle is a load of trouble.

Waziran: Bastard, you think this war is your personal affair? Peasants, weavers, fishermen, blacksmiths—all have joined the war along with their wives. When the Nawab of Malagarh came out in support of the rebellion, his begums fought alongside. When the chief of Gujar tribe, Shah Mull, fell in battle, the Gujar housewives took the battle. Housewives are fighting in the streets of Lucknow, Kanpur, Gwalior and Agra. . . . (Dutt, *Three Plays* 183)

Waziran is also pretty aware of the happenings and traditions India, how women have contributed in different wars. She has the insight and the bravery to face challenges. We see that when betrayed by the Prince Mirza Mughal, Heera Shingh is brought into the court and is ordered to be hanged, he asks for some water. No one offers him water but Waziran steps forward. She knows that there must have been a plot behind this act. All the sepoys under Heera believe him to be a traitor, except Waziran.

Govind: he was writing to the traitor Rajab Ali. There's a letter to prove it.

Waziran: How could Heera know that Rajab Ali has suddenly turned traitor? Heera was in the field. I know those rich men and the English officers very well. There's a plot behind it. You should have used your rifles to free him. (Dutt, *Three Plays* 212)

Lachman wants to find some stability in life through his relationship with Waziran.

Lachman: Heera Singh was right when he said I have no faith in anything. I have found nothing worth having faith in. No father, no mother, no religion, no interest in war.

Waziran: What about me?

Lachman: You are an awful bitch. You've discovered another insult.

Waziran: Of course. You know what I want to hear? You are lost in this world of conflict, but find peace with me. You rediscover your faith in my body.

Lachman: It isn't true. But I'll give it a try. Will you marry me?

Waziran: What?

Lachman: Let's get married and see if we can find something to hold on to. How about that? (Dutt, *Three Plays* 194)

We realise that marriage with a prostitute itself is a revolutionary idea and we find Dutt very comfortable with it. There is evidence of no sociological hiccups when Dutt introduces this idea in his play and

proceeds with this, as if the necessary action consequent to this proposal is the most normal thing in Indian society of the 18th century. Lachman wants to hold on to his roots. The English has made this generation rootless. They have made Indians homeless, tortures and the mess with religion have turned them faithless.

The English are saving the widows from being burnt alive, this is turning the people's attention towards Christianity. Simultaneously they are offering 'cow and pig fat' in the greased cartridges to the sepoys and, as they believe, destroying the base of religion. Again the introduction of the railways "will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rests the Indian caste system" (Dutt, *Three Plays* 128). All this together make the situation complex for the young generation to which Lachman belongs. So in his confusion and conflict, he is looking for stable roots, which he hopes to find in the union with Waziran. He realises that the enemy is not only the English but also the princes and the moneylenders of this country. So he raises the question in his conversation with Heera Singh:

Heera: You have this great war to cling to, where you are shedding blood for your country's freedom.

Lachman: I don't believe in it, sir. We are merely pawns in the hands of princes and moneylenders. Pawns can't go backwards, but only forward. They made these rules. But the queen, the bishops, the rooks, they can go as far back as they wish. And the king only moves one square this way or that in drugged inertia. I say our real enemy is not the English but our own princes and moneylenders. We should turn our guns around, cut their throats and play polo with their severed heads. (Dutt, *Three Plays* 191)

Lachman knows, so knows Kasturi, that only fighting against the English is not the way out. Kasturi, the wife of Bishen i.e. Heera Singh, also plays an important part in this revolution. She knows how there have been two wars going on at the same time. She tells the co-sepoys of Heera, after he is hanged—

There were so many of you here. Each had a gun, but no one raised it. Such is the fear of the princes in you, a fear many centuries old.

There are two battles raising at the same time—between us and the English, and between us and the princes. If you don't see that, you see nothing. The enemy is before you and behind you. While you fight one for freedom, the other stabs you in the back (Dutt, *Three Plays* 213).

The character of Kasturi, as Arup Mukhopadhyay also discusses in his biographical book on Utpal Dutt, has often been compared to that of Mother Courage in Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. War has snatched everything from Kasturi, so also from Mother Courage. And surprisingly it is the war that has kept them alive. She also instigates the sepoy, pointing to their cowardly attitude:

Kasturi: I open the sack for no bastard here. When it comes to fighting the English, you tumble over one another trying to get away. But within the city, with a poor defenceless woman, you're very brave. . . .

Lachman: You pick the uniform off the dead soldiers?

Kasturi: Yes. The more martyrs there are in this holy war, the more my business thrives. I want you to die in great numbers.

Parantap: Our deaths make business capital for this hag.

Kasturi: Your death is also business capital for the biggest merchants in the city. You wouldn't have the guts to lay hands on any one of them, would you? (Dutt, *Three Plays* 195-96)

So, Kasturi establishes the fact that the merchant class is ripping the profit from the war. This merchant class, tying up with the ruling class, controls society. They always prosper at the cost of the poor. As a Marxist, Utpal Dutt always speaks out at this 'bourgeois' class, and in his writings shows how they perpetuate torture upon the lower classes. He wants a 'revolution', a 'class struggle' that would render all the inequality in the society flattened.

Revolution, as Utpal Dutt wanted, should always start from the lowest, marginalised section of society. In his plays he always shows how this lower section of society actively takes part in the revolution or transformation. Waziran here belongs to the triply marginalised class,

in the sense that she is a Muslim, woman, and a prostitute, next to untouchable, of the English officers. But in the context of the play she is a character on whom the play depends a lot for its course of action. As has been discussed earlier how she has been portrayed as the embodiment of the local women folk of the time. She works as the agent who helps the sepoys decipher the diplomatic strategies of the English officers and take the right side i.e. for the revolution. Lachman is, from his very childhood, rootless and it is through Waziran that he tries to find a rootedness. She helps Lachman in his utter confusion and mental turbulence in which he is torn apart, seeing the dual nature of the English officers. It is Waziran, who with her powerful tongue taunts the sepoys constantly to fight against the English. The days of preparation of the rebellion against the English were very crucial and during this time the role of Waziran in agitating the sepoys is very crucial in this play. She has so powerful a tongue that she makes the sepoys revolt instantly in the army barracks. She works as a catalyst in the play. Not only so, but she also takes part physically in the battle with courage. She knows it is a fight of all the Indians regardless of sex, class, religion, and caste. Then there is the character of Kasturi, who provides the scope for illuminating some important points at the end of the play. She reveals the bitter side of war. She exposes how the middle class and the rich make profit out of the war. How the war takes life and at the same time is the source to keep oneself alive. She exposes dual war the Indians have to fight—one against the English and other against the merchant class, who betray the cause of the revolution for their own class interest. Thus these two women characters, portrayed in the play as the agents of revolution, have an important role to play which is decisive in the context of the story and plot.

Waziran is a powerfully portrayed character in whom Dutt invests all the energies of the revolutionary hero. In this play the dramatist redefines the accepted idea of heroism by creating in the fallen woman an image of bold, sometimes outrageous protest. Dutt was indeed being extremely courageous in that he made the prostitute the catalyst of change. She teaches how to look at the British, at their own sepoys through unblinkered eyes and the 'female' gaze is frightening in its

intensity. That she has nothing to lose but her fetters makes her a figure of undeterred courage, a female seer and again, a leader of the people. Dutt creates through her a cathartic explosion of national consciousness.

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Performing the Iraq War as Theatre of Witness in David Hare's *Stuff Happens*

L. D. Easter Raj Densingh

Abstract

David Hare's *Stuff Happens* dramatizes the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War through a fusion of verbatim theatre and fictional dialogue. This article examines the play's political potency and its ability to confront contemporary issues such as state propaganda, the ethics of war, and the failure of democratic institutions. Through a close analysis of its theatrical performance, the article investigates how Hare uses the stage to transform political discourse into a site of moral reckoning and public reflection. Drawing upon theories of documentary theatre and political performance, this study highlights *Stuff Happens* as a powerful intervention in the cultural memory of global conflict.

Keywords: political theatre, Iraq War, contemporary drama, verbatim theatre, documentary drama, theatre performance.

1. Introduction

David Hare is a prominent voice in British political theatre, and *Stuff Happens* (2004) represents one of his most compelling works. The play, which blends factual reporting with dramatic interpretation, focuses on the events leading up to the Iraq War, particularly the roles played by George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and other key figures. The title, taken from Donald Rumsfeld's infamous response to looting in Baghdad, sets the tone for a drama that explores the indifference and strategic detachment behind global conflict. This paper analyzes the play's theatrical performance and its engagement with contemporary issues such as truth manipulation, international diplomacy, and public accountability.

2. Context and Background

Stuff Happens premiered at the National Theatre in London in 2004, a year after the Iraq War began. The play emerged at a time when public trust in governments was rapidly deteriorating due to the exposure of falsified intelligence and covert motivations behind the war. Hare's use of political figures as characters and the inclusion of actual speeches and reports locates the play within the tradition of verbatim or documentary theatre, though Hare himself emphasized that *Stuff Happens* is a "history play," not a literal documentary. The piece serves as both a historical document and a site for ethical debate.

Theatrical Strategies and Political Resonance in David Hare's *Stuff Happens*

David Hare's *Stuff Happens* is constructed with a clear intention toward ensemble performance, utilizing a dynamic cast of actors who frequently transition between roles. This strategy not only fosters economy of staging but also underscores the *performative* nature of political power. The play's minimalist theatrical style relies on rapid scene transitions, fluid monologues, and constantly shifting viewpoints to generate a palpable sense of immediacy and urgency (Barnett 63). This stylistic economy draws attention away from spectacle and toward the rhetorical and moral weight of the characters' decisions.

One of the central performance strategies lies in the representation of real-life political figures such as George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, and Donald Rumsfeld. These figures are depicted with a balance of realism and critical nuance, presenting them neither as caricatures nor straightforward representations. Instead, Hare's writing invites actors to portray them with layers of intention, suggesting their humanity without absolving their culpability. In line with *Brechtian* principles of alienation, the audience is encouraged not to sympathize blindly, but to scrutinize these individuals as agents of power enacting scripts for public consumption (Brecht 92).

Narration and journalistic commentary serve as meta-theatrical devices interspersed throughout the play. These elements break the fourth wall,

offering contextual reflections, commentary, and framing that guide the audience toward critical detachment rather than emotional absorption. The National Theatre production notably emphasized this narrative strategy, employing it to underline how media, performance, and politics are deeply intertwined in the contemporary public sphere (Billington).

The stage design in most productions is consciously sparse, allowing emphasis to remain on dialogue, decision-making, and ideological debate. According to David Barnett, “Brecht’s theatre displaced spectacle with thinking,” and *Stuff Happens* similarly foregrounds language and argumentation over visual flourishes (Barnett 70). The setting shifts quickly from war rooms to press conferences, and from private meetings to public addresses, illustrating the fluid nature of political decision-making in a globalized media landscape.

A final but crucial component of the performance strategy is audience engagement. By portraying events that are recent and deeply embedded in public consciousness—such as the Iraq War, UN negotiations, and the “dodgy dossier”—the play establishes Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect. The goal is not emotional catharsis but intellectual reflection. As Bertolt Brecht describes, alienation aims to “free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today” (Brecht 91). The play thus transforms political leaders into performers in a theatre of governance, mirroring the media-driven performativity of modern leadership.

3. Political Themes and Contemporary Relevance

The enduring relevance of *Stuff Happens* is rooted in its interrogation of political ethics, public discourse, and global power structures. Although set in the early 2000s, the themes Hare engages with reverberate powerfully in contemporary political discourse.

4.1 Truth and Propaganda

One of the play’s central themes is the manipulation of truth for political ends. The play dramatizes the shaping of intelligence narratives, particularly through Powell’s infamous UN speech and Blair’s reliance on dubious reports. In a period often described as the post-truth era,

characterized by the rise of fake news and information warfare, Hare's exploration of manufactured consent finds urgent contemporary parallels (McIntyre 46). The infamous "dodgy dossier" becomes symbolic not just of flawed intelligence but of how governments manufacture legitimacy for military action.

4.2 Moral Ambiguity and Leadership

Hare presents a morally complex portrayal of leaders. Tony Blair emerges as a figure of deep internal conflict, torn between allegiance to the United States and his desire for ethical justification. In contrast, George W. Bush is depicted with ideological certainty, often reducing moral dilemmas to matters of black-and-white belief. This tension between ethical responsibility and realpolitik mirrors what Michael Ignatieff describes as "the crisis of moral authority in liberal democracies" (Ignatieff 102). The play poses essential questions about what kind of leadership can—or should—govern in an age of ideological warfare and shifting geopolitical alliances.

4.3 Public Accountability

Stuff Happens is especially trenchant in its critique of executive overreach and democratic erosion. Hare stages multiple closed-door meetings, where dissenters like Hans Blix or Robin Cook are marginalized or outright ignored. This dramaturgical choice mirrors real-world concerns about the lack of transparency and institutional accountability in war-making decisions. The play ultimately calls attention to the fragility of democratic oversight, particularly in moments of national or global crisis.

4.4 Imperialism and Global Politics

The play's broader geopolitical critique addresses neo-imperial tendencies in Western interventionist policy. Hare frames the Iraq War as a continuation of colonial logics under the guise of humanitarianism and security. As postcolonial critics like Edward Said have argued, such interventions are often "ideologically justified forms of domination" (Said 284). *Stuff Happens* implicates both the United States and the United Kingdom in reproducing imperialist modes of control, a theme that

resonates in contemporary global flashpoints such as Ukraine, Gaza, and continued Western involvement in the Middle East.

Certainly! Here's an expanded and cohesive continuation of your research article on *David Hare's Stuff Happens*, developing Sections 5–7 with academic tone, MLA in-text citations, and fluid scholarly transitions from earlier sections.

5. Theoretical Framework

The dramaturgical strategies employed in *Stuff Happens* are best understood through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on Brechtian theory, documentary theatre traditions, and the performance studies paradigm.

5.1 Brechtian Theatre and Alienation

Bertolt Brecht's theory of *epic theatre* fundamentally shapes the structure and aesthetic of *Stuff Happens*. Central to Brecht's vision is the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, which seeks to prevent passive emotional identification and instead provoke a critically engaged audience. In Hare's play, moments such as direct address, documentary-style narration, and rapid scene shifts function to interrupt narrative immersion, fostering reflection rather than empathy. As Brecht states, "The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically" (Brecht 71). In *Stuff Happens*, the alienation effect is not just a formal technique but a political strategy: it compels viewers to assess the real-world consequences of governmental decisions rather than merely watch a dramatic retelling.

5.2 Documentary Theatre and Hybrid Textuality

The play also aligns with what Carol Martin and Derek Paget term *documentary theatre*, wherein real-life events, interviews, and political documents are theatrically rendered to preserve factual integrity while allowing interpretive dramatization. Hare's integration of verbatim speeches from public figures—especially Powell's UN address or Bush's press conferences—alongside speculative private dialogues creates a hybrid theatrical form. Martin explains that "contemporary documentary theatre blurs the line between journalism and art, seeking not to replicate but to reframe historical truth" (Martin 15). By balancing authenticity and artistic

license, *Stuff Happens* exemplifies how documentary drama has evolved in the 21st century to accommodate complex, media-saturated political realities.

5.3 Performance as Power

From a performance studies perspective, the play can be read through Jon McKenzie's assertion that "performance is the means by which power is actualized and legitimated" (McKenzie 18). On stage, characters do not merely represent political figures—they enact power through language, posture, evasion, and persuasion. These performances mirror the public presentations of political leadership in media-driven democracies, where rhetoric often supersedes truth. Hare's theatrical rendering thus becomes a meta-performance, holding a mirror to the ritualized spectacle of statecraft. In this sense, *Stuff Happens* is not only a performance about war but a performance of performance—exposing how power is performed, consumed, and critiqued in contemporary society.

6. Reception and Impact

Upon its premiere at the National Theatre in 2004, *Stuff Happens* was met with both critical acclaim and contentious debate. The play was praised for its audacity, timeliness, and political candor. Critics such as Michael Billington hailed it as "an urgent piece of political theatre that speaks to our moment" (Billington). However, others questioned whether dramatizing events so soon after their occurrence risked reducing complex global conflicts to premature judgment. These debates underscored the broader cultural question: Can theatre act as a form of journalism or civic inquiry?

Indeed, the play ignited conversation about the role of theatre in shaping public consciousness. Unlike traditional media, which is often constrained by commercial interests or state pressures, theatre offers a communal, embodied space for critical engagement. In Hare's hands, the stage becomes a site for accountability, where the machinery of war is stripped bare and scrutinized in real time.

In academic and educational contexts, *Stuff Happens* has proven

invaluable for students of political science, literature, and performance studies. Its blend of documented fact and dramatized speculation encourages learners to interrogate the construction of narrative and truth, while its moral ambiguities provide fertile ground for debate on ethical leadership and democratic responsibility. As Carol Martin notes, “Documentary theatre invites audiences not to accept reality but to question the processes by which it is constructed” (Martin 22). This pedagogical utility ensures the play’s continued relevance in classrooms exploring the politics of representation.

Furthermore, the play has influenced a generation of playwrights and performance-makers who seek to address contemporary events with ethical urgency. From verbatim theatre about climate change to dramatizations of refugee crises, Hare’s work has laid the groundwork for an activist theatrical tradition that continues to evolve.

7. Conclusion

David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* stands as a seminal work at the intersection of theatre, politics, and contemporary history. Through its innovative use of ensemble performance, minimalist staging, and documentary structure, the play not only recounts pivotal geopolitical decisions but also interrogates the very processes by which those decisions are made and justified. Drawing upon Brechtian theory, documentary aesthetics, and performance studies, Hare reimagines political theatre as an active forum for civic dialogue and ethical reflection.

In an age where media narratives often obscure accountability, *Stuff Happens* offers a vital counterpoint—a reminder that art can reclaim public discourse by engaging audiences in critical, collective interrogation. As global politics continue to be shaped by performative gestures, shifting truths, and moral complexities, Hare’s play remains profoundly relevant. It affirms that theatre, at its best, is not merely a mirror to society but a tool for its transformation.

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Performing Shakespeare in Post-Pandemic Theatre

Shamsad Nahar

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic radically disrupted the global ecology of live performance, forcing theatres across the world into an abrupt silence and compelling practitioners to reinvent the very language of theatrical communication. Among the most significant outcomes of this rupture was the redefinition of “liveness” itself—a quality central to theatre’s ontology and especially to the performance of Shakespeare, whose works have long thrived on immediacy, communal presence, and interpretive renewal. This paper investigates how Shakespearean performance in the post-pandemic era has navigated the tension between physical absence and mediated presence, and how new forms of digital and hybrid theatre have emerged as both creative necessity and aesthetic innovation.

Through an analysis of global and regional case studies—including the Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Dream* (2021), an ambitious motion-capture experiment based on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; Creation Theatre’s interactive online *Romeo & Juliet*; and Teatro Lliure’s minimalist, screen-based *Richard III*—the study traces how pandemic-era experiments have evolved into sustained post-pandemic practices. These performances not only expanded the visual and technological grammar of Shakespearean theatre but also redefined audience participation, spatiality, and emotional connectivity in mediated environments.

Drawing upon theories of digital performance, posthuman embodiment, and affective spectatorship, the paper argues that post-pandemic Shakespeare represents an ongoing negotiation between tradition and transformation—between the human body on stage and its digital double, between physical theatre spaces and virtual platforms. In this

reimagined theatrical landscape, Shakespeare functions as both a familiar cultural anchor and a dynamic medium for reflecting collective trauma, resilience, and adaptation. Ultimately, performing Shakespeare in the post-pandemic world becomes an act of recovery and re-enchantment: a reaffirmation of theatre's enduring capacity to connect, transform, and survive amid uncertainty.

Keywords: Shakespearean performance; post-pandemic theatre; digital dramaturgy; hybrid stage; liveness; audience engagement; virtual performance; theatrical space; cultural resilience; adaptation and innovation

Introduction: Performing in the Shadow of the Unknown

In March 2020, the lights dimmed across the world's theatres. Curtains froze mid-motion, rehearsals dissolved into uncertainty, and the communal hum of anticipation that once filled auditoriums was replaced by silence. The global outbreak of COVID-19 brought about an unprecedented paralysis in live performance, compelling artists, audiences, and institutions to confront an existential question: *what is performance without presence?* Theatre—an art form fundamentally dependent on immediacy, human proximity, and shared experience—found itself abruptly severed from its most vital organ, the audience. Yet, from this rupture arose a moment of radical reinvention. Stripped of physical space, theatre-makers began to experiment with new digital, hybrid, and spatially distanced forms that challenged long-held notions of liveness, embodiment, and spectatorship.

Within this crisis of form and meaning, Shakespeare's plays occupied a uniquely resonant position. Historically, his works were born out of similar periods of social disruption; the London theatres were repeatedly shuttered due to plague outbreaks in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In this sense, the playwright's oeuvre has always existed in dialogue with contagion, instability, and renewal. During the pandemic, Shakespeare once again became a cultural mirror reflecting collective anxieties and hopes. His texts, rich with themes of isolation (*Hamlet*), contagion (*Romeo and Juliet*), political upheaval (*Coriolanus*), and regeneration (*The Tempest*), acquired a new immediacy for global audiences living through confinement and loss.

As performance migrated to digital platforms—Zoom, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, and innovative streaming sites—Shakespearean theatre became a fertile ground for experimentation. Directors, actors, and designers explored the possibilities of screen intimacy, technological mediation, and interactive audience engagement. Productions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Dream* (2021), an immersive motion-capture reimaging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Creation Theatre's online *Romeo & Juliet* illustrated how the crisis accelerated a broader aesthetic shift: from static archival recordings toward dynamic, participatory digital dramaturgy.

The reopening of theatres in 2021–22 did not simply mark a return to normalcy but rather the emergence of a hybrid era—one that straddles both the physical and the virtual, the local and the global. In this evolving landscape, performing Shakespeare became an act of negotiation between tradition and innovation, embodiment and mediation, intimacy and distance. Post-pandemic Shakespearean performance thus serves as a microcosm of theatre's broader transformation, revealing how artists have reimaged presence, reconfigured space, and redefined community in a world irreversibly shaped by digital culture and collective trauma.

This paper examines how performing Shakespeare in the post-pandemic era rearticulates the aesthetics and ethics of theatre-making. It considers how digital practices developed in isolation have informed contemporary performance ecologies, and how the resilience of Shakespeare's dramaturgy continues to provide both a foundation for creative experimentation and a mirror for humanity's ongoing recovery. In tracing this evolution, the study argues that post-pandemic Shakespeare is not merely a survival strategy—it is a renewed act of imagining what theatre can be in an age of uncertainty.

Theatre in Suspension: Pandemic as Performance Crisis

When the pandemic struck, theatre—perhaps more than any other art form—was thrust into a state of existential suspension. Its defining feature, *liveness*, became its greatest vulnerability. Theatres closed not only as public venues but as symbolic spaces of shared human contact.

This collective cessation created what performance scholar Rebecca Schneider calls “the time of interruption,” a liminal moment when theatre had to confront its own ephemerality and dependency on the body. For the first time in centuries, the notion of gathering—so integral to the theatrical act—was recast as a public health threat.

This unprecedented global standstill forced the theatre community to rethink its ontology. What happens to performance when the body cannot assemble, when the actor’s voice travels not through the air but through compressed digital waves? Early lockdown experiments—table reads over Zoom, monologues recorded in bedrooms, and live streams from empty auditoriums—were at once acts of desperation and resilience. They represented theatre’s instinct to survive, to persist even when its traditional modes of being were denied.

Shakespeare became a central medium through which this crisis of presence was explored. His texts, already familiar and flexible, offered a linguistic and emotional vocabulary for articulating isolation and endurance. Numerous online projects emerged, such as *The Show Must Go Online*, a global initiative that staged every Shakespeare play via Zoom, featuring actors from different continents performing together in real time. These makeshift digital stages, while technologically limited, created a transnational community of performers and audiences united by the desire to keep theatre alive. The immediacy of shared presence was replaced by the simultaneity of shared connectivity—an evolution that blurred the line between stage and screen, performer and spectator.

The absence of physical co-presence also highlighted theatre’s fragility as an economic and social ecosystem. Artists faced precarity, venues grappled with financial collapse, and audiences were forced to renegotiate their relationship with art. Yet, paradoxically, the same crisis expanded access and inclusivity. Online performances reached audiences across borders, time zones, and socio-economic boundaries, democratizing a form that had often been geographically and financially limited. In this sense, the pandemic did not merely suspend theatre—it reframed its purpose.

As the world gradually reopened, it became evident that the theatre emerging from the pandemic was not a resurrection of the old order but the birth of a new one. Hybrid practices—blending live performance with digital streaming, interactive participation, and virtual scenography—became central to post-pandemic production models. The very definition of “liveness” had shifted from physical co-presence to a relational dynamic encompassing both material and mediated experience. Theatre was no longer defined solely by space but by connectivity, by the networked assemblage of bodies, screens, and shared affect.

In this suspended moment between disappearance and reinvention, Shakespeare functioned as both a stabilizing force and a laboratory for experimentation. His plays—endlessly interpretable, culturally canonical, and textually rich—allowed artists to question not just how theatre could survive, but what new forms it might take in a world permanently altered by distance.

Shakespeare and the Digital Turn: Performance in Isolation

During the lockdown years, companies large and small experimented with what Pascale Aebischer calls “viral Shakespeare”—a transmedial phenomenon where the Bard’s plays “went viral” through streaming, remixing, and global accessibility (Aebischer). Theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), National Theatre, and Globe began releasing recorded archives free of charge, democratizing access while also redefining the temporality of performance.

Independent troupes created original digital adaptations. The Oxford-based Creation Theatre’s *Romeo & Juliet* (2021) took place entirely online, combining live Zoom acting, audience participation via polls, and pre-recorded narrative branches. The play’s tragic love story became a metaphor for separation in an era of enforced distance. Similarly, in *The Show Must Go Online*, director Robert Myles organized weekly readings of Shakespeare’s plays via YouTube, bringing together hundreds of actors worldwide.

Eleni Timplalexi notes that “theatre and performance went massively online,” merging live and mediatized modes to produce new forms of

collective spectatorship (Timplalexi). The “digital stage” became a social commons, allowing audiences from multiple countries to occupy the same virtual space. Such projects challenged the long-held assumption that theatre’s essence is inseparable from physical co-presence.

A New Aesthetic of Distance

These pandemic experiments also generated an aesthetic of fragmentation, intimacy, and domesticity. Actors performed from their living rooms, framed by webcams and household objects. The boundaries between public and private blurred. The close-up replaced the proscenium; eye contact was reimagined as lens contact.

Benjamin Broadribb’s study of three digital *Hamlet* projects—an Instagram adaptation, a web series, and a Zoom performance—identifies what he terms “metamoderndepthiness,” where sincerity and irony coexist to create new emotional depth. This digital intimacy, paradoxically, made certain soliloquies (“*To be or not to be*”) feel more confessional, as if Hamlet were addressing the viewer personally through the screen.

However, MélineDumot cautions against romanticizing digital theatre as a replacement for live performance. She emphasizes that while online Shakespeare broadened access and creativity, it also exposed the limits of remote connection: “The digital stage is no utopia—it is a laboratory that must eventually feed back into the living stage” (Dumot 12).

Reopening the Stage: Shakespeare in Post-Pandemic Performance

When theatres reopened gradually in 2021–22, many retained digital infrastructure developed during lockdown. The RSC’s *Dream* (2021), based on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, used motion-capture technology and virtual reality environments to allow remote audiences to “interact” with avatars of Puck and other characters. The production’s fusion of live acting, gaming engines, and immersive design marked a watershed in hybrid Shakespeare.

Hybrid theatre—part live, part digital—became the defining mode of post-pandemic performance. Hussin and Bianus argue that hybridization is not merely a stopgap but a sustainable technique to preserve theatre’s

vitality after COVID-19. Their Malaysian case studies of *King Lear* and *SelAkhir* demonstrate how camera integration and real-time streaming can extend audience reach while maintaining theatrical immediacy (Hussin and Bianus 3).

In this new ecology, the actor must negotiate both stage space and screen space. The director must choreograph movement for two audiences simultaneously: the one seated in the theatre and the one watching remotely. The hybridity of post-pandemic Shakespeare thus redefines the ontology of performance—it is both ephemeral and archived, both communal and individualized.

The pandemic's constraints also revived outdoor and site-specific Shakespeare, echoing the open-air theatres of Elizabethan London. In the United States and Europe, numerous productions relocated to parks, courtyards, and riversides. A 2022 *Tempest* on the Thames reimaged Prospero's island as an ecological metaphor for renewal after catastrophe. Similarly, small troupes in India and Southeast Asia performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in public gardens, emphasizing connection to nature and communal healing.

These performances reflected a shift in spatial poetics. The distance mandated by public-health guidelines became an expressive tool: masked actors, circular staging, and audience spacing visually inscribed the pandemic's memory into the mise-en-scène. As Isabel Guerrero notes in her study of Spanish theatre, “performing Shakespeare became an act of historical consciousness—the stage itself a memorial to loss and endurance” (Guerrero 14).

Economic strain forced theatres to adapt to smaller casts and tighter budgets. Directors used minimalism creatively: one-person *Hamlet* productions proliferated, emphasizing psychological depth over spectacle. The TeatroLliure's *Richard III* (2021), staged with a single performer, embodied this ethos—turning constraint into aesthetic focus. The monologue form mirrored societal isolation, while live streaming allowed remote spectators to share the intensity.

Themes of Contagion, Isolation, and Renewal

Performing Shakespeare post-pandemic is not only a technical adaptation but also a thematic reawakening. The pandemic reframed many of Shakespeare's motifs: the body, contagion, moral authority, exile, and redemption.

King Lear—written during plague years—became a touchstone for exploring aging, vulnerability, and social disintegration. Directors highlighted Lear's isolation as symbolic of pandemic loneliness. *Measure for Measure* gained new relevance through its focus on governance, surveillance, and morality in crisis. *The Tempest* emerged as a narrative of restoration, with Prospero's renunciation mirroring humanity's longing for reconnection.

Zied Ben Amor observes that post-COVID Shakespearean pedagogy and performance alike use these texts as “critical mirrors for understanding trauma and resilience” (Ben Amor 11). By foregrounding Shakespeare's own encounters with plague, artists reclaim him not as an untouchable monument but as a companion in survival.

One of the central debates in post-pandemic theatre concerns “liveness.” Philip Auslander long ago argued that live and mediatized performances exist in symbiosis, not opposition, yet the pandemic intensified this dialectic. Can a streamed performance evoke the same immediacy as shared physical presence? The answer seems to lie in the *experience of co-presence*, even when technologically mediated.

Post-pandemic Shakespeare suggests that liveness is not a fixed property but a perception—a felt sense of being “together in time,” whether in a room or on a screen. The hybrid model embraces this multiplicity rather than erasing it.

The digital shift widened the reach of Shakespeare globally, but it also exposed inequities. Not all audiences had stable internet or devices; not all artists could afford technology. Digital theatre risks privileging the technologically literate. Therefore, ethical post-pandemic practice demands inclusive access—low-bandwidth streaming, captioning, and multilingual options—to prevent cultural elitism from re-emerging under a digital guise.

Another concern is training. Actors trained during the pandemic often lacked opportunities for vocal projection, spatial awareness, and ensemble interaction. As RSC director Daniel Evans recently lamented, “actors trained in isolation may lack the physical and vocal range that live theatre demands” (“Actors Trained During Pandemic”). Post-pandemic education must therefore integrate both media literacy and embodied technique.

Moreover, there is a risk of technological spectacle overshadowing dramaturgy. When projections or AR dominate, Shakespeare’s language—his rhythm, rhetoric, and emotional truth—can recede. Sustainable innovation must serve the text, not subvert it.

Toward a Resilient Shakespearean Future

The post-pandemic world demands a theatre that is both adaptable and ethical. From the ruins of closure, a new paradigm has emerged—one that values **resilience over permanence, hybridity over purity, and collaboration over hierarchy**.

Key strategies include:

1. **Modular production design** that allows seamless transition between live, hybrid, and online formats.
2. **Actor retraining programs** emphasizing both physical and digital expressivity.
3. **Community co-creation**, where local audiences participate in shaping Shakespeare’s relevance to their context.
4. **Sustainable technology use** that minimizes cost and carbon footprint.
5. **Archival transparency**, ensuring artists retain agency over digital recordings.

Shakespeare’s endurance across four centuries has always depended on reinvention. The post-pandemic stage merely extends this tradition. The Bard, whose own theatres were repeatedly shut by plague, continues to teach us how art survives catastrophe—not by resisting change but by transforming through it.

Conclusion: “The Play’s the Thing” in a Changed World

Performing Shakespeare in the post-pandemic era is less a return than a rebirth—a reawakening of theatre’s core vitality after a period of enforced stillness. The global crisis did not simply interrupt performance; it redefined it. The theatre that has emerged from this rupture carries both the scars and the revelations of isolation. Its artists have learned to move between physical and digital worlds with fluency, adapting the language of gesture and voice to screens as readily as to stages. Its audiences, once bound by geography, have become transnational communities connected through shared virtual spaces. Its directors and designers have grown more reflexive—questioning the ethics of proximity, the aesthetics of distance, and the politics of gathering.

The vitality of Shakespearean theatre in this transformed landscape lies not in reproducing historical conventions, but in rearticulating presence under new conditions. Post-pandemic performance has revealed that *liveness* is not merely the co-presence of bodies, but a dynamic relationship of attention, empathy, and exchange that can transcend physical boundaries. Shakespeare’s plays, resilient across centuries and crises, continue to provide a dramaturgical framework through which artists and audiences can process collective trauma and imagine renewal.

Whether enacted in a reopened auditorium, streamed through digital networks, or performed on hybrid stages that merge the virtual with the tangible, Shakespeare today speaks to a changed world. His words, once uttered in times of plague and political turbulence, resonate anew amid contemporary uncertainty—reminding us of the cyclical nature of human endurance.

Ultimately, “the play’s the thing” not merely as a theatrical metaphor but as a philosophical assertion: performance persists because it mirrors life’s own capacity to adapt, improvise, and survive. In the post-pandemic age, performing Shakespeare becomes an act of both remembrance and reinvention—a testament to theatre’s timeless ability to find meaning, connection, and beauty even in the shadow of crisis.

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Globe Theatre 1612



London, UK, Globe Theatre

Queer Bodies, Feminine Souls: A Cinematic Exploration of Male Femininity in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada* and Kaushik Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan*

Amit Sarkar & Preeti Pankaj Gupta

Abstract

Focussing on how queer bodies and feminine souls are depicted against the background of Bengali socio-cultural narratives, this paper investigates the cinematic portrayal of male femininity in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada* and Kaushik Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan*. These films transform male femininity into a physical experience rather than an external show and consider its social and psychological relationship to gender non-conformity. Using a qualitative approach, this study integrates queer theory, gender studies, cinema studies, and close textual and visual analysis. It examines both internal and external tensions through plot, character arcs, acting, costume design, and cinematic space. The research shows *Chitrangada* uses male femininity to show personal and artistic ways people assert themselves in terms of gender, while *Nagarkirtan* demonstrates how this expression becomes a representation of love, together with strength and marginalized experiences. These films fight against standardizations by showing that queer lives receive sufficient emotional investigation because they form complex realities and serve as groundbreaking masterpieces of South Asian queer cinema by reframing masculinity and femininity beyond conventional boundaries.

Key-words: Male Femininity, *Chitrangada*, *Nagarkirtan*, Queer Theory, Gender non-conformity

Introduction

In contemporary cinematic discourse, there has been a sea change in how gender and sexuality are portrayed, with a departure from rigid binary systems and an acceptance of a more nuanced and inclusive view of individuality. Over many years, South Asian cinema endured heterosexist and patriarchal heritage until it began showing new movies that push against set masculine and feminine stereotypes. Bengali cinema serves as an important leader in this developing landscape due to the work of picture directors Rituparno Ghosh and Kaushik Ganguly, who investigate intricate gender and sexual, and emotional relationships. The South Asian cinematic scholarship does not explore male femininity enough but *Chitrangada* (2012) and *Nagarkirtan* (2017) depict queer identities through multi-dimensional portrayals of this facet.

The academic field shows growing interest in queer representations in global cinema yet a specific research gap appears regarding the study of male femininity especially concerning Indian regional films. Most academic works either discuss queer character visibility or queer sexual transgression but disregard the body-based expression methods of male femininity. The specific way Bengali cinema displays queerness through historical, mythological, and sociopolitical factors requires separate analytical techniques. The evaluation of male femininity from a cinematic perspective in *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* needs immediate scholarly attention because dedicated discussions about its creation and audience reception are lacking.

The article evaluates how *Chitrangada*, directed by Rituparno Ghosh, and *Nagarkirtan*, directed by Kaushik Ganguly, use cinematic elements to represent male femininity as a multifaceted identity construct that combines elements of resistance and identity forging alongside desire and transformation. Both films use creative storytelling and visual representations to present male femininity as a valid transformative life path, which challenges traditional gender norms instead of viewing it as deviant castration.

This research carries importance because it works to shift critical analysis toward a thorough understanding of male femininity appearing

in South Asian film production. Analysis of *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* demonstrates regional cinema's capability to participate in universal queer discussions and also integrate these concepts into regional cultural narratives using local storytelling elements and affective traditions. This analysis of queer bodies and feminine souls in these films enhances scholarly discussions among gender studies, queer theory and cultural studies and film studies disciplines.

This article traces its study of gender representation in film toward an examination of how Bengali cinema depicted male femininity in two critical works. Through Ghosh's *Chitrangada* and Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan* the viewers gain essential insights regarding gender performativity and queer cultural dialogue as well as the political character of body language. The films use an emotional cinematic technique that focuses on characters showing weakness while seeking connection and maintaining their strength, thus urging viewers to reevaluate how society connects masculinity to power and femininity to frailty.

This subject carries exceptional importance owing to its cultural literary coupling with its social manifestations. Literarily the films utilize traditional literary and folk representations of Chitrangada by Tagore and Vaishnav practices to link queer expression with accepted cultural symbols which reconstruct queer identities while also normalizing them. These films bring essential attention to gender expressions that society ignores while it battles both homophobia and transphobia, along with gender dichotomies. These films create an essential shift in Indian regional movie narratives because they advance inclusive, empathetic forms of human representation. These films explore male femininity because they demonstrate societal changes and actively work to construct fresh understandings regarding gender along identity.

This article expands our knowledge about the cinematic portrayal of queer bodies combined with feminine souls through scenes which depict them with dignity as well as depth and power in Bengali cinema. The text demonstrates how marginalized and misrepresented male femininity transforms into a creative space that sustains resistance while expressing authenticity. The mentioned cinematic portrayals present a revolutionary

perspective on gender identities that exists outside traditional gender binaries, thus encouraging viewers, together with academic researchers, to explore alternative ways of understanding personal identity.

Literature Review

This article traces its study of gender representation in film toward an examination of how Bengali cinema depicted male femininity in two critical works. These two landmark films *Chitrangada* directed by Ghosh and *Nagarkirtan* directed by Ganguly present essential study points about gender performance alongside queer negotiation systems and corporeal political messages. The films use an emotional cinematic technique that focuses on characters showing weakness while seeking connection and maintaining their strength, thus urging viewers to reevaluate how society connects masculinity to power and femininity to frailty.

This subject carries exceptional importance owing to its cultural literary coupling with its social manifestations. Literarily the films utilize traditional literary and folk representations of Chitrangada by Tagore and Vaishnav practices to link queer expression with accepted cultural symbols which reconstruct queer identities while also normalizing them. These films bring essential attention to gender expressions that society ignores while it battles both homophobia and transphobia, along with gender dichotomies. These films alter the fundamental storytelling approach in Indian regional movies, thus facilitating more comprehensive human representation. These films both portray and construct new images of gender and identity by exploring the development of male femininity, which reflects ongoing sociocultural changes in society.

This article expands our knowledge about the cinematic portrayal of queer bodies combined with feminine souls through scenes which depict them with dignity as well as depth and power in Bengali cinema. The text demonstrates how marginalized and misrepresented male femininity transforms into a creative space that sustains resistance while expressing authenticity. Through this analysis, researchers suggest that the films present gender identities in a non-binary perspective, allowing both viewers and scholars to find new methods of understanding multiple forms of identity.

The dominant focus of scholarly research on queer studies consists of queer visibility through activism and legal stories (*Narrain, 2014; Misra, 2016*) instead of analyzing gender performance from aesthetic and affective perspectives. Despite their fundamental value, multiple scholarly studies use sociological and rights-based approaches according to *Khanna (2014)* and *Dave (2012)* while missing opportunities to approach gendered artistic expressions from narrative perspectives. The current research demonstrates a neglected space that interdisciplinary analysis about film studies, with the integration of gender theory and cultural studies, could explore.

Research benefits from both identifying Bengali queer cinema's cultural unique features (*Ganguly, 2020*) along with understanding differences between queer narratives based on Indian regions (*Gopal, 2018*). Current scholarship fails to distinguish between transgender identities and gay and feminine-male identities while also grouping queer experiences as a uniform category. The study currently lacks exploration of how male femininity functions both aesthetically and politically through performative emotions, according to *Reddy (2021)*.

The objective of this research is to investigate *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* by assessing male femininity as a physical manifestation of heteropatriarchal resistance. These movies achieve their goal through mythological symbols and religious elements, and affective storytelling to establish male femininity as an authentic path for self-empowerment. The combination of film theory with queer and cultural analysis provides this study with valuable research methods to enhance existing scholarship on Indian regional films that depict gender diversity.

Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative theoretical methods to analyze *Chitrangada* (*Ghosh, 2012*) and *Nagarkirtan* (*Ganguly, 2017*) through medium-level textual and visual methods and the theoretical concepts from queer theory, gender studies and film studies. In the main research method, analysts *Ghosh (2012)* and *Ganguly (2017)* examine both *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* using detailed interpretations to study how

films portray male femininity through storylines and characters alongside visual elements and symbolic representations.

The evaluation of narrative and character development, performance approaches, costume implementation, and spatial film techniques relies on close reading methods. The analyzed elements serve as fundamental components since they display male femininity through the inner struggles and social agreements present in each film's narrative fabric (*Bordwell & Thompson, 2016; Monaco, 2009*). Highly significant scenes in *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* showcase how important female bodily movements are depicted visually by camera framings along with costume design elements.

The research draws its primary theoretical framework from queer theory and employs *Butler's (1990)* performance-based gender theory and *Sedgwick's (1990)* research on male same-sex attraction. The understanding of how male femininity disrupts gender binaries receives direction from Halberstam's (1998) research on female and alternative masculinities. Analysis of gender-based visual elements derives from *Salamon (2010)* and *Ahmed (2006)*, while cinematic methods from *Mulvey (1975)* and *Stam (2000)* explain both the construction and deconstruction of typical visual attraction patterns.

The research method examines the unique presentations of male femininity in *Chitrangada*, which draws from mythological sources against the social-religious discrimination of *Nagarkirtan*. The films share their cultural features from modern Bengali cinema, thus leading to their joint comparison according to *Ganguly (2020)* and *Gopal (2018)*. Scholarship becomes more reliable when researchers specify precise filmic contexts because this practice eliminates broad conclusions about Indian film traditions.

The selection of *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* fulfills a purpose because these films shift toward exploring the central dramatic status of male bodies experiencing feminization by examining their psychological aspects. These films present emotional, along with existential themes rather than external oppression, which delivers a deep investigation of male embodiment and feminine traits.

This methodological approach establishes male femininity as an active lifestyle that cinema expresses through nuanced filmmaking elements.

Results and Analysis

1. The Performing Body: Male Femininity as Embodied Vulnerability

The male figures use their bodies to express femininity by performing heightened emotions while displaying physical weakness and showing tenderness across *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan*. During his acting preparation for *Chitrangada*, Rudra transforms his body between masculine and feminine elements (Ghosh, 2012). He announces his quest for self-discovery through the direct statement “*Aami amar nijeke khuje berachhi*” (“I am searching for myself”) (Ghosh, 2012). Similarly, through his voice and physical gestures alongside his costume, Porimal/Ritwick transforms into a feminized character even though he plays the role of a woman in *Nagarkirtan* (Ganguly, 2017; Mulvey, 1975).

Critical Comment: Through corporeal femininity the film challenges mainstream male strength while demonstrating queer orientations according to Ahmed (2006).

2. Myth and Melancholia: The Narrative Structure of Gendered Suffering

Through mythological and religious references, these films build a context of male-feminine expression where cultural sadness embraces male gender identity. The film presents *Chitrangada*’s Mahabharata character who desires femininity to romance Arjuna, while Rudra experiences a sex transformation before finding no contentment with romance. According to Butler (1990), gender functions as a “stylized repetition of acts,” while Rudra repeatedly fails to match his internal longings with external social requirements, which shows how gender collapses into acute pain. During *Nagarkirtan*, Porimal demonstrates his devotion to Radha-Krishna traditions, which elevates his feminine nature above social derision (Banerjee, 2019). The motif of the flute—a symbol of Krishna and eternal yearning—reappears as a metaphor for unattainable love and unattainable identity.

Critical Comment: Tragic yearning defines male femininity in both tales by demonstrating the established social belief that deviating from gender norms leads to suffering (*Chakraborty 2020; Narrain 2014*).

3. Performance Styles: Beyond Drag, Towards Emotional Realism

Ghosh, along with Ganguly, depart from drag show stylings to showcase emotional realism in their artistic performances. The movies break away from mainstream drag presentations, which rely on outrageous feminine characterizations for show by featuring characters who demonstrate persistent, delicate expressions showing strong together with weak emotional states. The development of subtle bodily signals, including a gentler speech tone and light hand movements, represents “bodily becoming” as narrated by *Salamon (2010)*.

Ritwick Chakraborty maintains a controlled acting approach in *Nagarkirtan* that avoids parodic effects to engender the “slow production of gendered selfhood” described by Halberstam (1998) (*Sen, 2020*). Porimal’s displaying of femininity becomes visible only through occasional small actions like his dupatta placement and shy smiles.

Critical Comment: The methodical inward approach to performance in these films achieves a genuine quality that opposes traditional Bollywood styles of exaggerated gender deviation (*Gopal, 2018*).

4. Cinematic Space: Confinement and Queer Yearning

Film settings in both productions use space to represent characters’ emotional expressions. In *Chitrangada*, Rudra spends most of his time in restricted areas such as dark rehearsal rooms and cramped apartments to express the nature of social oppression and his inner turmoil (*Ghosh 2012*). Emergency sites like train stations and concealed passageways are where Porimal and Madhu cultivate their intense bond in *Nagarkirtan*. The mostly vibrant atmosphere of Kolkata becomes one where people feel alienated in stereotyped commercial films (*Ganguly 2017; Bordwell and Thompson 2016*).

Critical Comment: Through spatial confinement the film presents limitations which queer, feminine male bodies face when participating in public activities (*Stam, 2000*).

5. Costume and Color: Visual Codes of Femininity

The strategic use of costumes in design helps create visuals that depict unclear gender identities. Throughout *Chitrangada*, the main character Rudra wears neutral black-white outfits that show his internal distress before transforming into vibrant flowing dresses which appear during his dance performances (*Chatterjee, 2017*). In *Nagarkirtan*, Porimal wears simple pastel-colored saris which demonstrate passive female self-expression without exhibitionistic displays (*Banerjee, 2019*). Color scheme design serves as a visual tool that extends the representation of characters' emotional states exactly as Bordwell and *Thompson (2016)* describe it as “*expressive mise-en-scène*.”

Critical Comment: The clothing choices help the characters maintain their condition of visible-invisible identity status according to Sedgwick (*1990*) in his theory of queer epistemology.

Summary of Key Findings

- Male femininity appears through physical openness and romantic desire, which extend deeper than superficial fashion choices or limited traits.
- Both films challenge traditional happy endings; fulfilment stays out of reach, stressing queer existence as a process instead of a destination (*Ahmed, 2006*).
- The filmmakers use cinematic spaces alongside costume elements to visually display the experiences of marginalized genders faced by their protagonists.
- The films instead respect male femininity by recognizing it as an intricate identity that demands consideration and opposition.

Discussion

Analysis shows that *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* deliver an insightful depiction of male femininity through bodily experiences, which upsets mainstream media and cultural norms. Both films shift their approach by portraying male femininity as a space that enables self-discovery as well

as personal weakness, and fighting against societal norms. Such cinematic representations challenge heteronormative gender structures defined by *Butler (1990)* while showing the clear necessity to rethink film representation after heteronormative systems.

1. The Personal as Political: Embodied Femininity and Queer Existence

The protagonists of both *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* embody a femininity that is lived, not performed for heteronormative consumption. This embodiment aligns with Ahmed's (2006) theory of queer orientation, where bodies that "do not line up" with dominant scripts reveal the contingency and artificiality of gender norms. Rudra's and Porimal's lived experiences of gender demonstrate that femininity in a male body is not an imitation of cis-femininity but a genuine mode of being. These narratives counter the cinematic tradition in India, where queer bodies were historically portrayed as deviant or comic (Gopal, 2018; Dutta & Roy, 2014). Thus, the personal struggle for identity becomes a political act of resistance against systemic erasure.

2. Narratives of Suffering and Queer Temporality

One significant implication of the analysis is the recognition that both films, while affirming male femininity, remain anchored in tragic structures. The melancholic endings—Rudra's emotional isolation and Porimal's death—reflect a broader queer temporality described by Edelman (2004), where futurity and fulfillment are denied to queer bodies.

While these narratives might seem regressive, they also expose the violence of compulsory heteronormativity and societal cruelty. As Halberstam (2005) notes, embracing queer failure allows alternative understandings of success, intimacy, and life goals. In this light, Rudra's and Porimal's failed quests are not simply tragedies; they are acts of survival, documenting the costs of living authentically in a hostile environment.

3. Spaces of Alienation: Visualizing Marginality

Spatial analysis shows how the film directors portray social discrimination of queer and feminine bodies by placing them within

confined dimly lit peripheral spaces. According to Chakraborty (2020), spatial marginalization creates a direct parallel with both emotional exclusion and political marginalization. The film departs from Bollywood's representation by showing queer romance happening within covert alleys as well as train compartments and small apartment spaces. The specific spatial beauty matches Sedgwick's (1990) definition of "closet" space because it exists as both a hidden and restrictive realm for negotiating possibilities. The movies provide an analytical map which identifies the experiences of queer people living in modern urban India.

4. Performance Styles: Quiet Radicalism

Instead of obvious demonstrations, characters like Rudra and Porimal convey female characteristics employing subtle and gentle emotional techniques. Media in India normally shows drag-like excess, but both characters break this trend (*Sarkar, 2017*). Through emotional precision in their acting choices, the directors create a "materiality of gender" according to Salamon (2010) because their characters enable audiences to feel gender beyond merely seeing it. Such a shift allows viewers to move away from mere sight-gazing at differences and instead engage with the real-life experiences felt by characters. These films work toward developing compassionate scenes about gender nonconformity in cinema.

5. Challenging Normative Masculinity

Chitrangada and *Nagarkirtan* break traditional Indian male identities that are traditionally linked with strength alongside stoicism and heterosexual virility (*Banerjee 2017*). The films show the destruction of hegemonic masculinity through their depiction of male characters who display vulnerability along with their tender and emotional states as described by Connell (2005). Between them, these films present fully dimensional depictions of femininity without reducing their leading men to one-dimensional characters, which attacks traditional gender polarities and creates space for flexible masculinity expressions in Indian cultural stories.

6. Engagement with Cultural Myth and Spirituality

The movies employ sophisticated mythological and spiritual elements

to complicate how male characters display feminine traits. The Mahabharata retelling in Chitrangada and the Radha-Krishna devotion in Nagarkirtan indicate through their context that fluid gender identities always existed, but nationalist storylines hide this truth (*Vanita & Kidwai, 2000*). Through this traditional reference, the authors reject the misconception that queerness represents a foreign Western concept by proving that queerness exists naturally in indigenous religious systems.

7. Responding to the Research Question

The study investigates the cinematic portrayal of male femininity in Chitrangada and Nagarkirtan along with their cultural effects. The analyzed films present male femininity through an inclusive and emotionally sensitive lens while precisely showing how marginalization and mythical elements cooperate to validate it. The research adds new perspectives to queer cinema analysis by studying how space, myth and affective experiences provide center stage for marginalizing gender representations as explained by Ghosh (2018) and Gopal (2018).

8. Linking Back to Literature and Theory

This research traces its entire work back to literary and theoretical lineages. While gender identity functions according to Butler's (1990) theory, the great exhibition of bodily suffering complicates abstract gender theories. These films align with Ahmed's (2006) conceptualization of emotional spaces and Sedgwick's (1990) ideas about knowledge through secrecy as well as Halberstam's (2005) support for queer letdowns.

Indian cinematic traditions had shown limited interest in portraying queer femininity in male bodies to such emotive narrative levels (*Sarkar, 2017; Dutta & Roy, 2014*). These texts help expand the collection of cultural work that redefines traditional Indian sexual and gender identities.

The films Chitrangada and Nagarkirtan demonstrate how male femininity flourishes when filmmakers recognize it as a genuine living existence rather than a deviation. Through their films these directors establish spaces that show both pain and love together with spiritual elements and beauty in genuine life representations of queer subjects.

These films show progress by expanding India's film industry's examination of gender and sexuality and by establishing queer bodies as more than just sites of suffering while proving them to be genuine human expressions of resistance.

Conclusion

The research aimed to analyze how Chitrangada and Nagarkirtan express male femininity through their emotionally engaged and politically charged cinematic formats. This qualitative theory-based research with queer theory and gender studies and film criticism components showed that both films present dignified and multifaceted male feminine characteristics that go beyond conventional cinema representations. By depicting queer existence in all its physical and religious complexity, Ghosh and Ganguly prevent the reduction of queer physicality to caricatures of torture or entertainment.

Male femininity throughout these films develops into a true identity that receives legitimate rights to love and self-expression according to Butler (1990) and Salamon (2010). Through their depiction of gender nonconforming subjects, the films illustrate the physical relocation and social marginalization explored by Sara Ahmed (2006) in her concept of queer orientation. The films support Halberstam's (2005) research by avoiding sensationalism when depicting queer sadness thus embracing failed and sorrowful narratives as tools of queer resistance.

The films employ mythological frameworks and spiritual traditions which modern queer discourse (*Vanita & Kidwai, 2000*) commonly disregards to create an effective indigenous queer history recovery. This approach counters colonial and nationalist erasures of gender nonconformity in South Asian cultures (Dutta & Roy, 2014). Both stories of Rudra and Porimal merge individual personal stories with shared cultural traditions that elevate these films into more than personal accounts to become active cultural interventions.

This study accepts multiple restrictions, although it continues to advance. The analysis exclusively studied two films directed by two Bengali directors, which restricted its capacity to establish broader

conclusions about Indian cinema. The study paid significant attention to narrative content along with visual presentation but does not adequately examine how caste social classes and geographical locations affect queer representation. The comprehensive understanding of queer expression in Indian cinema depends on these three critical dimensions according to the research of Banerjee (2017) and Gopal (2018).

Research expansion should include the application of detailed literary and theoretical examinations on male queer embodiment in Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi and other regional Indian film sources to uncover alternative representations. Steady research should focus on non-binary and transmasculine presentations within Indian cinema because these portrayals are scarce throughout cinematic literature (Chakraborty, 2020). Analysis of male femininity through studies comparing Indian cinema with queer movie productions from other Southern regions including Iran and the Philippines would produce valuable insights about the diverse social expressions of male femininity (Sarkar, 2017).

Intersectional frameworks (Crenshaw, 1991) together with queer theory would enhance comprehension of the relationship between caste, class, religion and region as they affect Indian male experiences of femininity. Such a research method would create a multi-dimensional assessment of queer characters in movies.

Ultimately, these films extend multiple cinematic elements to describe male femininity through stories that prompt viewers to question fundamental concepts of gender alongside human experience. Indeed, both the films showcase queer bodies as locations of delicate feeling alongside struggle and legend and endurance which creates a transformative impact on South Asian cultural creation.

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The TI Manifesto

THEATRE INTERNATIONAL, EAST-WEST Perspectives on Theatre: the title tells you where we are at. This is an international journal-cum-Drama book. In the constitution of its Editorial Board, in its wide-angle global readership, in its range and scope of subject matter and focus, in its selection of experts and specialist writers this publication caters to the frontierless international community of the Performing Arts and Artists.

This publication hopes to enrich the Indian theatre culture in concrete ways—for the present dramatic culture lacks a creative correlation between theory and praxis. Our connections and involvement in University Performing Arts, Drama and Literature Departments makes **Theatre International** favorably situated to bridge the grey areas between pedagogy and performance. On the other hand, theatre is ultimately performance. Hence papers and articles on the productional aspects will find valuable place in all issues of *TI*.

Moreover, the realization that the theatre cuts across both culture and history is evident in the works of our avant-garde theatre thinkers. The University Drama Departments have every access to and special avenues of communication with theatre movements throughout India and abroad. *TI* is committed to the task of making the necessary intercultural linkages and disseminating the available material to theatre enthusiasts and professionals here. Likewise, *TI* can help make the intelligentsia abroad aware of the Indian, Asian and African theatre scene. Hence *TI* can serve as a medium and forum for international cultural exchange.

Both our masthead and our readership include and span high-IQ decision makers in the performing arts spread across the five continents—University Faculty, members of Akademis and theater ensembles,

performing artists and intellectuals, the cultural avantgarde of Europe, America and Asia. The contents of *TI* will thus range from *Kathakali* to *Kabuki*, from the *Yakshagana* to the *Guerilla theatre*, from the *Peking Opera* to the performative processes of the *African folk traditions*, from Tagore to T. S. Eliot, Shakespeare to Stanislavsky, Kafka to Karnad, reflecting and embodying the creative thrust of the global theatre scene.

TI has published and will publish *Special Issues* in future on Brecht, Tagore, Folk theatre, Political theatre, Theatre and Film, Translation, Adaptation and, of course, on Shakespeare among other subject areas.

The Shakespeare Society of Eastern India, under whose aegis *TI* is being published, has helped spearhead the new resurgence of both academic and popular interest in Shakespeare that emerged from the mid-seventies throughout Bengal and India.

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1	International Journal of Cultural Studies and social Sciences	Avantgarde Press, Tagore-Gandhi Institute/Shakespeare Society	2347-4777	NA	View
2	Theatre International	Avantgarde Press, Tagore-Gandhi Institute/Shakespeare Society	2278-2036	NA	View

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400	Theatre International	Avantgarde Press, Tagore-Gandhi Institute/Shakespeare Society	2278-2036	NA	View

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