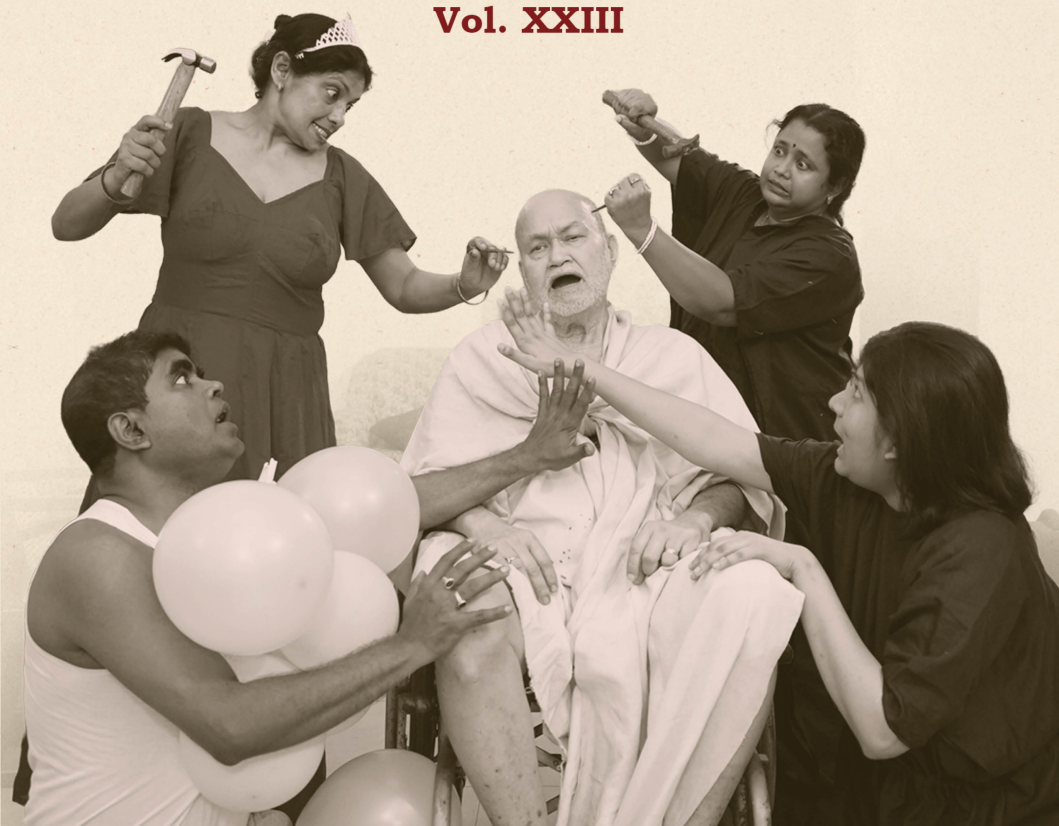


THEATRE INTERNATIONAL

UGC-Approved, Biannual, Peer-Reviewed,
Multidisciplinary International Journal
UGC-CARE LIST form 2017 to February 2025
Arts and Humanities Group I
With Crossref Digital Object Identifier (DOI)

Vol. XXIII



June 2025, December 2025 & June 2026

Eds.

Subir Kumar Dhar, Tapu Biswas,
Bryan Reynolds, Sheila T. Cavanagh, Papia Mitra

Editor-in-Chief & Corresponding Editor Tapu Biswas



A Special Publication of
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SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY

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AVANTGARDE PRESS

A Special Publication of

TAGORE-GANDHI INSTITUTE / SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY

Published by
Avantgarde Press (ISO Certified)
Shakespeare Society of Eastern India.
Tagore Gandhi Institute & Shakespeare Society of Eastern India.
146, Sarat Bose Road, Subash Nagar
Dum Dum Cantonment, Kolkata - 700065/
6A, Maharaja Nanda Kumar Road, P.O. Sarat Bose Road, Kolkata 700029.
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Website Address : www.ssei.org.in/ www.tgi.org.in

**Web Link : <https://tgi.org.in/theatre-international-volume-xxiii/> &
<https://ssei.org.in/TI/Vol-XXIII.pdf>**



Editor-in-Chief & Corresponding Editor Professor (Dr) Tapu Biswas

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Society, Reg No. S/49021 of 1985 -86.

Issue : June 2025, December 2025 & June 2026

Published on 31 March 2026

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The authors of the papers are responsible for the opinion expressed, use of data, graphs, field surveys, statistics not the Editors and publishers.

Typing: Tapasya Biswas

Front cover: Performance workshop by SSEI

Layout by: Tapu Biswas

Printed at:

Mahamaya Press & Binding

23, Madan Mitra Lane, Kolkata -700006

Price: 2500.00 (Rupees Two Thousand Five Hundred) only

US \$30

UK £25

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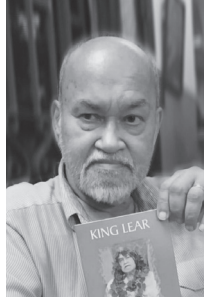
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In Memoriam

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.

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL 2017

Serial No. 49202

UGC Journal Details

Name of the Journal : Theatre International
ISSN Number : 23782036
e-ISSN Number :
Source : UNV
Subject : Multi-disciplinary Theatre Studies, English Literature
Publisher : AVANTGARDE PRESS
Country of Publication : India
Broad Subject Category : Arts & Humanities; Multidisciplinary

UGC-CARE LIST SINCE 2019

≡ UGC-CARE List

Sr.No.	Journal Title	Publisher	ISSN	E-ISSN	Action
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

UGC Approved Arts and Humanities Group I Journals - 2024

Sr.No.	Journal Title	Publisher	ISSN	E-ISSN	UGC-CARE coverage year	Details
1	Aabru (print only)	Gurmukh Singh	2456 - 253 X	NA	from April - 2020 to Present	View
2	Aadhunik Sahitya (print only)	Vishwa Hindi Sahitya Parishad	2277 - 7083	NA	from April - 2021 to Present	View
3	Aalochan Drishti (print only)	Aalochan Drishti Prakashan	2455 - 4219	NA	from April - 2021 to January - 2022	Discontinued from Jan. 2022
4	Aashwast	Bharati Dalit Sahitya Academy Madhyapradesh	2456 - 8856	NA	from July - 2021 to Present	View



436	Theatre International	Avantgarde Press, Tagore-Gandhi Institute/Shakespeare Society	2278 - 2036	NA	from January - 2020 to Present	View
437	Think India Journal	Vichar Nyas Foundation	0971 - 1260	NA	from June - 2019 to January - 2020	Discontinued from Jan. 2020

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Editorial

This **volume (XXIII) of the Theatre International** is a slighter one than normal, yet the essays are all deeply thought-out. “And though she be but little, she is fierce”. It ranges from Elizabethan stage to Victorian to modern plays, including those little known to the ordinary audience. But they all emphasize the social context of the plays and except the first one focus on gender and power-hierarchy and how to overcome disadvantages.

Professor (Dr.) Ronan Paterson offers a thorough account of the boys who performed female roles on Shakespeare’s stage. He challenges assumptions about their age, training, and supposed inability to portray complex women realistically. He discusses the historical context that gave rise to these boys, their training, gender conventions of the age which are different from today’s, sumptuary laws, and how the Civil War cut off the supply of apprentices while Restoration allowed the emergence of female actors. Professor Paterson argues that those performers were regarded as skilled collaborators rather than temporary substitutes and that is how we should read the texts.

Dr. Bidisha Munshi presents a political reading of Arun Mukherjee’s *Mareech, the Legend*, showing how a marginal epic figure can be utilized to demonstrate how coercion works across feudal, democratic and nationalistic systems. Her analysis of the Ustad, jatra framing, and the “Meri Baba” sequence shows how theatrical form becomes political argument. Mareech is neither an innocent victim nor a simple villain. The appearance of Valmiki historicizes the epic and raises questions of authority. Munshi observes that the play’s power lies not in traditional morality but in showing that the real danger lies in tyrannical power and those who are willing to accept it.

Dr. Pangeejam Sanjeev interprets Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* as a tragedy shaped by existential nihilism, spiritual loss,

alienation, addiction, and psychic conflict. The article discusses how the various problems suffered by the Tyrone family actually connects them. It is an existentialist play developed from the fear of his failure to locate any soothing meaning of life in the world. Sanjeev points out that this is the state of the modern man's life today.

Dr. Sujeta Beishamayum provides an overview of Ratan Thiyam's Theatre Movement, arguing that gesture, silence, martial discipline, ritual, scenography, and ensemble choreography make the body a primary dramatic text. Performance study is an important critical discourse today and Thiyam's plays are analyzed in the essay in that context. The body can become a text by itself and its gestures produce realism beyond dialogue. Beishamayum effectively communicates Thiyam's international theatrical significance.

Dr. Swati Roy Chowdhury offers a queer reading of Bengali Jatra through Susan Sontag's *Camp*, Judith Butler's performativity, and feminist theatre histories. She argues that Jatra's over-exaggerated display and acting can destabilize conservative plots by exposing gender and authority as performances. It had begun as a folk sacred ritual but in modern ages has been transformed by themes of Marxism, capitalism and modern political realities. Chowdhury through detailed descriptions illuminate structural disruption in modern jatra. Chowdhury ends by concluding that jatra is naturally queer.

Dr. Tilok Naskar recovers Ritwik Ghatak's neglected theatrical work through a study of *Jwalanta*, linking Partition displacement, state corruption, gendered violence, and public apathy. The article does a scene-by-scene analysis of the play clearly explaining how post-partition society has become lawless and corrupt offering security for no one. The playwright shows his disgust with this society, particularly with those in power who are corrupt demanding at the end that people rise up. Naskar emphasises that the play is a call to action and relevant even today.

Dr. Shinjini Ghoshal shows a new dimension of Arthur Conan Doyle by placing his plays within the Edwardian revival of morality drama. She discusses Victorian interest in middle ages, success of morality plays, class anxiety, scientific progress, Darwinian theories, and spiritualism. Conan Doyle himself suffered the typical Victorian conflict between faith and reason. This ended up with him composing plays in that format. But this is not only a Victorian curiosity. Thanks to popular fiction and TV drama series modern digital culture is also imprinted with medievalism.

Samim Aktar Molla studies Poile Sengupta's Samara's Song through Foucauldian methodology. Power is not always visible but lies in use of language, rituals of mourning, domestic hierarchy, surveillance and bodily discipline. The ruler is mostly physically absent but she is everywhere as well since her power permeates every corner. Identities can be manufactured through use of power/knowledge dynamics. Common people also become compromised. The author of this paper emphasizes how Sengupta shows a network of regulations and power produce self-governing subjects and that revolution does not mean actual liberation since the new rulers might behave like the old once they taste power – yet the song of hope always remains.

Dr. Suraiya Sultana reads Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* through Foucault and Lefebvre. The Trivedi home is a patriarchal urban space that disciplines women's bodies, speech, work, and movement. Patriarchal violence is normalized and internalized. Like the madwoman in Jane Eyre who was locked up, women are also locked in this framework objectified as a commercial product. Yet this is also resisted and ultimately the home instead of being a prison also becomes an open space for new possibilities. Sultana successfully shows how the play illuminates how apparently prosperous homes conceal gendered isolation, coercion, trauma, but also can bring out agency of women.

Chitaranjan Taorem and **Professor (Dr.) I Gambhir Singh** from Manipur North-East India in their joint paper have demonstrated that India has a rich and diverse theatrical heritage that reflects its cultural traditions and social realities. Among its various performance forms, *Shumang Leela* and *Naya* theatre stand out for addressing social issues, political changes, injustices, and societal dynamics. Through their performances, they raise public awareness and encourage social reflection. They have made a comparatively analyse of *Shumang Leela* and *Naya* theatre to examine their roles and contributions to society.

Gothic expert **Professor (Dr.) Aparajita Hazra** in her paper examines the evolving boundaries of the human in relation to artificial intelligence and machines, focusing on the German web series *Cassandra*. It explores how *Cassandra*, a robot designed to assist a family, becomes a threatening and controlling figure. Her observation in the paper is to analyses the uncanny, Monstrous Feminine, Abjection, and Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to understand AI's interaction with human emotions and society. From a posthumanist and Gothic perspective, the paper questions the potential of AI to transcend human boundaries and become an unsettling source of fear and horror.

Dr. Janki Srivastava in her paper highlights the psychological and behavioral challenges students face in the digital age, including cyberbullying, screen addiction, and digital misconduct. It argues that traditional cyber wellness education is often ineffective because it lacks emotional and practical engagement. To address this, the study proposes a theatre-based educational intervention using experiential learning, role-play, and dramatization to help students understand digital dilemmas, develop empathy, and translate cyber safety knowledge into responsible online behavior.

Dr. Madhumita Majumdar in her paper analyses Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* through the lens of Anthropocene ethics and ecocriticism. Drawing on Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" and

Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene*, it examines Franny Stone's journey to witness the final migration of Arctic terns. The study highlights the interdependence of humans and non-human life, emphasizing ecological kinship, vulnerability, care, and shared responsibility. Dr. Majumder argues that the novel challenges anthropocentric thinking and promotes ecological consciousness and ethical responsibility in the face of environmental collapse.

Professor (Dr.) Tapu Biswas in his article examines the relationship between Badal Sircar's Third Theatre and the Bengal Theosophical Society in Kolkata, arguing that the Bengal Theosophical Society was not merely a performance venue but an important intellectual and cultural space in the development of his theatrical practice. Its principles of human unity, service, spiritual inquiry, and Eastern philosophy aligned with Sircar's emphasis on social justice, collective consciousness, and direct communication. The Society's flexible and intimate space enabled his Satabdi group to experiment with participatory, minimalist, physical, and non-proscenium theatre. The study discusses that the Bengal Theosophical Society significantly contributed to the aesthetic, practical, spatial, and philosophical foundations of Sircar's Third Theatre and modern Bengali alternative theatre. Dr Biswas has explored the - history of the performance of Badal Sircar's plays *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas*, *Hattamalar Hattamalar Opore*, *Captain Gondi*, *Basi Khabar*, *Sara Raatir*, *Kottho Kotha Janmabhum* Aaj, Michhil, & Trinsha Shatabdi, and Mohit Chattopadhyay's play *Captain Hurrah*.

Dr. Sahabuddin Ahamed and **Dr. Ashutosh Singh** apply critical disability theory to Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*, arguing that disability is socially and politically constructed. Tara's family privileges Chandan, making her doubly marginalized as female and disabled. The play exposes patriarchal prejudice, internalized discrimination, and identity based injustice, and demands justice, dignity, and emancipation for

disabled people. Ahamed and Singh argue that this is not only about disability but also about be what it means to be human.

Molay Sarkar examines how uncontrolled desire drives Marlowe's tragic heroes toward greatness and destruction. Tamburlaine seeks dominion, Barabas wealth and revenge, Faustus limitless knowledge, and Edward personal affection above duty. Their ambitions enable self-fashioning and temporary triumph but cause transgression, isolation, moral blindness, and inevitable physical, political, or spiritual collapse. Sarkar noted that the very force that made these heroes great also destroyed them.

This volume ends with a book review on a very contemporary updated critical response on *Marketing Shakespeare* written by Dr. Lipika Sikdar. This book review is done by an eminent law practitioner **Shri Subham Sikdar**.

Happy Reading
Editors.

Player Queens Boy Actors on Shakespeare's Stage

Ronan Paterson

ABSTRACT

When William Shakespeare created some of the most memorable female roles in all of world theatre he had no realistic possibility that he would ever see those roles played by women. Instead he wrote for young male members of the company, who played female roles. The recruitment and training of these young players, and the ways in which they represented the female characters they played on stage have long been the subject of debate amongst scholars, but all too often the analysis is based upon false premises, informed by unsupported traditions and generalised assumptions rather than analysis.

Key words : Shakespeare; boy actors; training; portrayal of gender; eventual disappearance

Within the structures of Early Modern English society, where literacy was far from widespread, the training of young men for future employment outside the formal educational structures was largely in the hands of the Trade Guilds. Although not directly part of the Guild structure, Shakespeare's company, The Lord Chamberlain's (subsequently King's) Men, had a broadly similar scheme of apprenticeships. Young boys were recruited into the company, apprenticed to the Sharers, such as John Hemminges or Augustin Phillips, and as part of their apprenticeship they played not only page boys and servants, but also the parts of young girls. Whether they played mature female characters such as Cleopatra or Volumnia is another discussion, but they certainly played Juliet and Desdemona,

and when it came to the Comedies they played Viola and Hermia as a matter of course.

While it is easy today to imagine a teenage boy playing Benvolio or Biondello, it is rather more difficult for a modern spectator to imagine a theatre in which Juliet was always played by a young boy. Shakespeare's audience was aware that the actor playing Juliet was a boy, even if the playing was extremely convincing. Given that all of the companies in London operated in the same way, the main point of theatrical comparison was with other young boys playing girls. Perhaps an occasional foreign traveller or a disingenuous visitor from the country would believe it was indeed a girl, but most of the audience knew it was a boy yet found it perfectly acceptable. Within the parameters of the performance the boys were girls. This convention was, in context, unremarkable even though, for modern audiences at least, it raises questions as to how the boys played those girls.

To envisage this requires the unravelling of two strands of preconception, one regarding the experience of the audiences of the time, the other to do with the acting skills and traditions of the performers. In order to enter into the mindset of Shakespeare's original audience, a modern reader has to completely set aside Twenty-First Century ideas about gender. Gender operated very differently in Shakespeare's time, and the actors who portrayed women in the plays were operating against another set of rules. In the societies of Elizabethan and Jacobean England the whole performance of gender¹ was different. In many societies today the prevailing views of gender are largely based upon Early Twentieth Century constructs. To put these constructs in very general terms, there are conventions that certain behaviours are "boyish" and others, very different, are

1 The word performance is used in the sense that Judith Butler describes in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", in *Theatre Journal* No. 40, (1988), pp 519-531), Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press. This idea is discussed fully in Orgel, S (1996) *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

appropriate to girls. Transgressing against these codes by either sex, can be punished either through ridicule, social exclusion, or in more extreme cases, bullying, violence or even, in some societies, danger to life. What these codes contain has² varied somewhat with the passage of time, or in specific cultural contexts, but there are still certain traits in common. Boys are expected to be louder and more boisterous, and qualities such as strength and toughness are favoured in the upbringing of males, whereas girls are expected to be quieter, more demure, and to be more empathetic and emotionally expressive. Boys are discouraged from being too emotional, or from crying. Those traits are seen as traits of “girlish” behaviour. These codes are often reinforced through dress from the very earliest ages, even while a baby is still on the Maternity Ward. Boys are expected to wear blue, girls to wear pink, for example (although it was the other way round until the late Nineteenth Century). Boys wear trousers, and play football, girls wear dresses and play with dolls. Parents give boys cars and toy toolkits, girls are given prams and toy kitchen utensils. While this is a generalisation, the basic pattern is widely observable. But in the Sixteenth Century these ideas had not taken root.

Initially every young child was dressed in the same clothes. In Shakespeare's time both boys and girls wore dresses. Boys wore dresses for their first few years, until they were “breeched”, given their first set of masculine clothes, in a ceremony which over the years grew into a significant rite of passage. Boys would be given gifts and money at this time, in the way that Catholic children nowadays receive money for a First Communion or Jewish children for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In their earliest years it was virtually impossible to tell the boys from the girls. The dressing of young boys in the manner of girls persisted until

2 This section draws upon Skipper, Y and Fox, C (2022) “Boys will be boys: Young people's perceptions and experiences of gender within education” in *Pastoral Care in Education*, Vol. 40, Issue 4, 391-409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2021.1977986> and also “Peer Socialization of gender in young boys and girls” in the “Research & Policy” section of *The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*, available <https://share.google/FLz5ADw8oTLIqcjzp>

this author's father's time, in the 1920s. This was the case in England, but also in other countries. Velasquez painted a portrait of the heir to the Spanish throne as a young boy in a dress.



Crown Prince Balthasar of Spain, painted by Velasquez, (1663)

The FDR Presidential Library and Museum holds a number of photographs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, later American President, so dressed as a young child. But even after breeching, the behaviour of young boys and girls was not expected to be as strongly differentiated as is the case now. A young man might be praised for his beauty in exactly the same terms as a young woman. A young man might blush or burst into tears without censure. In later centuries such behaviour in a boy came to be derided as “effeminate”, but the Elizabethans and Jacobean used that word in a different way. A young man in love might be described as behaving in a manner which was considered “effeminate”, such as Romeo: “O sweet Juliet, thy beauty hath made me effeminate”. (*Romeo and Juliet*, III,i) Indeed in other plays of Shakespeare, effeminacy is also invoked, but it is specifically described as pertaining to the actions of lovers, such as Mark Antony, made “effeminate” by his love for Cleopatra. It was not to behave in what might nowadays be referred to as a “girlish” fashion, because the word was not applied in that way, it meant to behave in a languorous and besotted fashion, particularly in relation to indecision.

Young boys might, if they were lucky, and their parents could afford it, attend some sort of school. Sending girls to school was not unknown, but was generally considered a waste. Girls were only sent to the most elementary of schools. Where schooling took place, and it was by no means universal, it began with “Dame Schools” or “Petty Schools”, which might take a child up to, at the very oldest, ten years of age. Here the child would learn basic literacy and Christian catechism. A small minority would attend Grammar School, where they would primarily learn Latin, and sometimes Greek, until around fourteen. The elite would then go on to Oxford or Cambridge. But the tiny percentage who did this were extremely privileged. Those others, who either did not attend school at all, who only attended Dame or Petty School, or those who, as we assume about Shakespeare himself, attended as far as Grammar School, were expected, as soon as they were free to do so, to help their families by earning a living. The lucky ones might hope to become apprentices within the appropriate structures. Apprenticeship was the accepted way of learning any craft or trade. A boy from a non-aristocratic background might hope, if he were lucky, to become an apprentice in order to learn to make his way in the world. The Trade Guilds, as the gatekeepers of these traditions, guarded their privileges and rights of entry jealously, but also protected their members faithfully.

Some of the senior members of Shakespeare's company were members of those Guilds. John Hemminges, for example, was a member of the Greengrocer's Guild, Robert Armin a member of the Goldsmiths. Although Stage Players were not a Guild as such, and while it was not necessary to be a member of a Guild to take on an apprentice, these young actors were apprenticed in a very similar way. They were personally allocated to the leading members of the companies, and were trained in performance. Their training was constant, they lived, like most apprentices, with their masters, they worked in the playhouses or toured the highways of the kingdom day after day, year after year, and they were being guided and instructed

by the best actors of their day, including William Shakespeare himself. Although the gender stricture had slightly begun to change by Shakespeare's time, and there are a few records of women who became members of the Guilds, apprenticeship was almost exclusively available to boys,

Indeed the term "boy" was often used as an alternative to "apprentice", including reference to some of those who would nowadays be classified as adults. In subsequent centuries the term "boy" for a servant took on a large element of racial overtones and has now been dropped from ordinary usage, but up until the Twentieth Century "boy" could be applied to a servant who might be older than the person addressing him as such. Although many critics make assumptions concerning their ages, it is unsafe to be too dogmatic in deciding how old these "boys" were.

Colin MacInnes wrote his novel, *Three Years to Play* (1970), predicated upon the assumption that boys acted the girl's parts only for a short time in their middle teens, from thirteen to sixteen, and in so doing merely distilled the prevailing assumptions of commentators such as Nagler (*Shakespeare's Stage*, 1958). W. Robertson Davies' book *Shakespeare's Boy Actors* (1939) is a full and serious exploration of the subject, however at odds with modern scholarship, although he is surprisingly dismissive of the demands of many of Shakespeare's leading ladies, seeing Lady Macbeth as "well within the scope of a boy actor of sixteen" (Davies, 1939, p128) and Cleopatra the same (p132), which might surprise many highly respected and award laden actresses who have laboured to do the roles justice. Nagler takes a different view, but he too is very dismissive of the boys' contribution:

"... the mere fact that, while Burbage played Macbeth an adolescent impersonated Lady Macbeth seems to me to exclude any possibility of realism. A lad of sixteen could not possibly have played Lady Macbeth realistically. There was only one way to make the figure credible: stylization....the adult portrayer of Romeo ... and the apprentice disguised as Juliet...must be reduced to a common

denominator, and this common denominator can only be style..."
(Nagler, 1958, p81)

There is a lot to disagree with here.

Setting aside the assumption that the aim of the actors in Shakespeare's day was to achieve "realism", the assumption that "A lad of sixteen" (ibid) played Lady Macbeth is by no means certain. The actor who played Lady Macbeth might have been an adolescent, but might equally have been what would nowadays be classified as a young adult, as indeed might the actors playing Regan or Goneril, as even Davies acknowledges (1939, pp126-7). He could indeed have been an adult actor, as has been the case in many of the world's classical theatre traditions throughout history, in Ancient Athens, Japan, China, India or elsewhere.

Bypassing that controversy and focussing solely upon the putative age of a young male actor of female roles, Nagler's assumption that the boy would have been sixteen is based upon modern preconceptions. In the present day many boys' voices break around the age of twelve or thirteen, and almost all will have done so by sixteen. But boys' voices today break far earlier than they did in Shakespeare's England. Joy Leslie Gibson (2000, pp 66-7) discusses this matter with the Choirmaster of Durham Cathedral, where they have records of choirboys going back to 1560, which demonstrate that boys' voices broke several years later in Shakespeare's time. Sixteen was the average. She also quotes the early music specialist Gustav Leonhardt, in claiming that one of the reasons for this is that people today eat far more protein than the Elizabethans, and that a lower protein diet would have delayed the breaking of boys' voices (ibid). Elizabethan boys' voices might break at sixteen, eighteen, or even later. "In the late 15th Century, boys of Edward IV's choir were sent to University [at the age of 18] *if their voices had broken*" (Gibson, 2000, p67, her italics). The implication is that even at this stage some boys' voices had not broken. Some boys have lighter voices quite naturally. It is not impossible that boys might have reached twenty before their voices broke. But while the few

scholars to look closely at this matter have seen the breaking of the voice as a crucial change, it is by no means certain that it was.

What no-one has so far done is to make any effort to argue that a broken voice would preclude a man playing a young female role. It certainly did not preclude an *onnagata* such as Bando Tamasaburo giving a totally believable performance as a young woman, while aged sixty seven, in a Kabuki performance which this author attended in Tokyo in 2017. An ability to change one's voice, and to sound other than you are, is one of the most important elements in an actor's toolkit, and if the actor in question has already had a number of years' experience of playing female roles, it is quite naturally possible to adopt a feminine sounding voice.

The boys who were apprenticed to the players and trained primarily to play female roles in the plays. The reasons for this are clouded by many years of misapprehension and conjecture. There had been actresses in the Medieval English theatre³, and actresses were widespread elsewhere in Europe. Contrary to widespread popular belief it was never illegal for women to appear on stage in England. Glynne Wickham, whose still unsurpassed *Early English Stages* (1959) represents the towering body of knowledge upon which generations of scholars have depended, states that, after a lifetime of study of the subject and years of diligent and comprehensive search "I know of no decree, either ecclesiastical or civic which specifically forbids women to act" (1959, p271f). If women did not act on the public stage very often in Shakespeare's time, the reasons must be sought elsewhere⁴. That specific topic is beyond the scope of this article, but the fact that women did not act in the companies on those London stages created a whole theatrical culture of young men and boys who earned their living playing members of the opposite sex. So the questions as to how they did so must be explored.

3 See Wickham (op. cit), Orgel (op. cit) and many others, such as Stokes, J "Women and Performance in Medieval and Early Modern Suffolk" (op. cit)

4 For a more detailed discussion of this, see Stokes (op. cit)

Many of the boys were highly skilled at playing girls. If they were not, Shakespeare and his contemporaries would never have entrusted to them, among the admittedly conventionalised and somewhat two dimensional characters which also appear, such multi-faceted and complex characters as Rosalind, Viola, Portia, Juliet and possibly, although not indisputably, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra. To do so they were assisted by costumes, wigs and makeup, but they were also dependent upon vocal skills and acting techniques.

The old assumption, that the apprentices were primarily boys of around thirteen or fourteen, is not safe. Nathan Field, a very famous boy actor, began training at thirteen, and it is quite probable that this was a normal age to begin an apprenticeship with Shakespeare's company. Some may have begun their apprenticeship earlier or later, but taking Field as an example one can assume that thirteen is not a unique age for a boy to be taken into the company as an apprentice. Other documents relating to the terms of normal apprenticeships show an agreement binding a boy to his master for seven years, which would take him up to the age of twenty. Many present day drama students are around this age, but within the English conservatoire system they seldom give public performances of complete plays until their final year. At the same time they have to master the skills needed to perform a global repertoire, extending back two and a half thousand years. They also have to master the techniques required by a range of different media. These Elizabethan apprentices were working on full professional productions for seven years, day



Nathan Field

in, day out. The Elizabethan boy actors were only required to master one kind of acting. Within the specific limits of their own theatre, in terms of depth rather than breadth, they were far more experienced than modern drama students, at the same age.

So some of the boys could be up to twenty or twenty-one years old, and by that stage be highly trained actors with quite a lot of experience. These boys were very good at what they did, to be trusted with roles which modern actresses still find amongst the most challenging in the repertoire. Between them they played roles as different as Juliet, Joan La Pucelle, Helena, Cressida, Desdemona, Imogen (or Innogen), Perdita, Isabella, Viola, Portia, Kate, Rosalind, Olivia, Miranda, Cordelia. The list goes on. The way these characters were enacted, by male actors in female costumes and wigs, was stylistically similar to the way in which male characters were represented. Richard Burbage as Hamlet and the boy playing Ophelia performed within the same set of stylistic conventions. It is important also to stress that young actors, with proper care, preparation and guidance, can be highly accomplished in a wide range of roles. This author spent several years working on a BBC television series with young actors from early to late teens, and some of them were capable of extremely detailed and emotionally nuanced performances. This might have seemed inconceivable to Nagler, but it will not surprise modern audiences who have, as the Elizabethans did, many opportunities to see highly skilled young professionals on stage and screen. If they had not been good enough to hold up their end of scenes with Richard Burbage Shakespeare would have considerably reduced the requirements of the female roles in his plays.

Finally, Nagler uses the word “style” to describe the only way an adult male and a boy could act together. Style is of course central in any performance of any play. Achieving a unity of style between the actors is often a primary purpose of rehearsal. Style could, of course, be defined as stylization, but stylization carries connotations of excess and artificiality. This is by no means necessary to achieve unity of style.

Richard Burbage as Hamlet and the boy playing Ophelia performed within the same set of stylistic conventions. Every performance, then and now, sets out to find its own appropriate style. Nagler assumes "realism" as an intention, or as part of that style, but no actor in Shakespeare's day would have recognised what is nowadays termed "realism" in a theatrical context as being either achievable or desirable in the portrayal of roles in verse drama in an open-air auditorium in front of three thousand people.

There is another aspect to the representation of women on the stage in Shakespeare's theatre where law and social conventions assisted greatly. Throughout history different societies have enacted Sumptuary Laws, which defined the sort of clothing, the cuts and fabrics, which could be worn by different categories and classes in society. In practice these laws were almost impossible to enforce, as can be seen by the frequent need to pass new ones. Indeed one of the criticisms levelled at Players was that they dressed in ways to which they were not entitled, and as things which they were not. If a Duke was not instantly recognisable as being different from a mere yeoman, critics might say, the very fabric of society might be under threat. But it also worked the other way. Whatever you appeared to be, there was an expectation that was what you were. Of course this is an underlying assumption beneath most theatre traditions. Someone who appears to be a king is accepted as a king. Someone who appears to be a beggar is supposed to be a beggar, at least initially. Of course the beggar may turn out to be a king in disguise in a play, by throwing aside his defining garments and revealing himself.⁵ From there it is a comparatively short step to saying that whoever appears to be a girl is accepted as being a girl. There is more to it than that, but the Elizabethan theatre abounds with examples of a character putting on a hooded cloak and becoming unrecognisable to their own family

5 This did happen in life as well as art. James V, the grandfather of Shakespeare's King James, was well known for disguising himself as low-born characters to travel around his kingdom, seeking to understand his people, although also, reportedly, for amorous adventures

members. If someone walked onto the stage at the Globe Theatre or the Rose or Swan in a dress, with a wig, dressed as a lady, that person was accepted as such. From there on it was down to the actor's skills to play well or badly.

In Shakespeare's plays there are five examples of female characters disguising themselves as males. Rosalind, Viola, Portia, Imogen, and Julia all disguise themselves as males, for various reasons inherent in their stories. There are only three plays in which male characters disguise themselves as women. One is Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the portrayal is grotesque, another is Francis Flute playing Thisbe in the play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The other play in question is *The Taming of The Shrew*, and while this was the case in Shakespeare's time it very seldom happens in modern productions. In the opening scenes of Shakespeare's play a group of Players arrive, in his time an all-male troupe, and decide to put on a performance to play a trick upon Christopher Sly, a drunken tinker. One boy actor goes offstage to change into Katherine, while another changes there and then into a disguise as the supposed wife of Sly. Thus the artifice is pointed out in full view of the audience. Many, if not most, modern productions ignore this, but it is a crucial part of understanding what Shakespeare is doing with the play. The story of Katherine and Petruchio is not to be taken at face value.

There used to be a belief that Shakespeare's heroines disguising themselves as boys was a way to make it easier to cover up any shortcomings in the representations of female characters by the actors, but this is clearly not the case. Shakespeare wrote very demanding roles for the very same actors where they remain as female characters throughout the plays. Shakespeare's use of this masquerade as a boy raises questions of the boundaries of gender, particularly in *As You Like It*, where a boy playing a girl plays a boy pretending to be a girl, a four-level equation which really tests the limitations of commonplace definitions. But he does not do this in the opposite direction. He does not have a male character test the boundaries of his

sex by impersonating his opposite, other than in a context of disguise or play-within-a-play performance when the artifice is apparent for all in the audience to see.

The audiences knew that the girls were played by boys, but actually enjoyed and admired them in their roles, and admired the characters which they played. To give but one example, Samuel Pepys reminisced that Ned Kynaston “made the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life” (quoted in Wickham, Vo. 2, p139). It comes as no surprise that the Puritans found all sorts of moral concerns in the playing of female roles by boys. The assumption was that the boys dressing as girls would corrupt the said youths, and that those youths would grow up to adopt same-sex passions. While it would be fatuous to suggest that such things never happened, it was not a widespread criticism, and indeed a number of documented cases show boy actors maturing into actors of male roles in adulthood, and marrying and having families. The list is long. Alexander (or Sander) Cooke, Dickie Robinson, John Rice, Nicholas Tooley and a number of their fellows all did so, without any opprobrium or gossiping inuendo.

The boys were good at what they did, they were vital in Shakespeare's theatre, but they disappeared. There are a number of factors involved in this. The closure of the theatres during the English Civil War in 1642, and the disbanding of the companies, cut off the supply of apprentices. When the Court returned from exile in France in 1660 they had spent eighteen years watching a very different sort of theatre, indoor theatre as exemplified by Moliere and his contemporaries, where actresses were a permanent fixture, as indeed they were in Italy and Spain. Charles II issued a patent in 1662/3 saying

“That whereas the women's parts in plays have hitherto been acted by men in the habits of women, at which some have taken offence, we permit and give leave for the time to come, that all women's parts be acted by women” (quoted in Wickham, Vol 2, p139)

While this introduced a veritable host of highly talented actresses into the world of theatre, it also meant that the boys, who had served faithfully for as long as they were able, were now lost to the profession which they had graced for decades, and for whom Shakespeare had created some of his most memorable characters. Shakespeare's boy actors are nowadays reduced to a backwater of history, seen as a quaint anomaly, holding a place until actresses were able to come along. But when Shakespeare wrote he had no way of foreseeing the future. He wrote for the actors he knew, and he wrote his female characters for the boy actors who would play them, secure in the knowledge that they could certainly do so with distinction.

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Staging the Demon Minor in Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend*

Bidisha Munshi

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend* as a politically charged revisionist drama that reworks the Ramayana episode of Mareech to interrogate the structures of power hidden within both mythic and modern narratives. In this play, Mareech is not a marginal demon remembered only for his deception as the golden deer, but he is a creature who displays interiority, reluctance, vulnerability as well as moral conflict. Here our attention is shifted from epic heroism to the expendable intermediary as we witness how authority recruits minor figures into systems of violence while disguising oppression as duty, patriotism, democracy, or divine order. Through its jatra-like frame, Brechtian interruptions, songs, chorus, conscience figures, and metatheatrical questioning of Valmiki's authority, the drama unsettles the stability of inherited myth and turns performance itself into a mode of critique. The paper argues that the parallel plots involving landlord oppression, electoral manipulation, American imperialism, and nationalist rhetoric are not incidental modern additions but interpretive doubles of the mythic action. The playwright unmasks the recurring historical cycle in which vulnerable subjects become instruments of power by linking Mareech with figures such as Ishwar and Gregory. Eventually, *Mareech, the Legend* speaks not only of myth and politics, but of the painful human condition of being drawn into

systems of power, struggling with complicity, and still searching for the possibility of resistance.

Keywords: Arun Mukherjee; *Mareech, the Legend*;
Ramayana revision; myth revision; jatra;
Brechtian theatre; subaltern subject;
power and complicity; democracy;
imperialism; metatheatre

Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend* can be best read not as a respectful dramatic recycling of a familiar *Ramayana* episode, but as a fiercely interventionist political play that uses mythic material to expose the structures of coercion that organize both ancient kingship and modern democracy. Mukherjee refuses to let epic authority remain unexamined. His attention shifts away from Rama's heroic centrality towards the expendable intermediary, Mareech, a figure usually remembered only as the golden deer whose illusion enables Sita's abduction by Ravana, the Rakshasa (demon) king of Lanka. In Mukherjee's hands, that minor character becomes the hinge that joins mythology to landlord violence, electoral rhetoric, nationalism, imperial pressure, communal manipulation, and self-exculpating moral idealism. The result is a play that asks not simply what happened in the *Ramayana*, but who benefits when stories of duty and righteousness are told in certain ways.

This paper argues that *Mareech, the Legend* is a politically charged revisionist drama that refunctionalizes myth through a jatra-like performance frame, Brechtian interruption, and a subalternist suspicion of elite narrative. Rather than retelling the Mareech episode, Mukherjee transforms it into an inquiry into how power recruits the vulnerable, how ideology disguises exploitation, and how individuals become complicit in systems they do not fully control. In this sense, the play is not merely adaptive but revisionary in the strongest sense: it estranges inherited narrative, relocates moral attention from kings to those sacrificed beneath them, and lets even

Valmiki's authority be questioned from within the stage-world itself (Brecht; Guha; Hutcheon).

The play's politics reflects even in its form. Before Mareech appears as a character, the Ustad enters the stage as mediator, impresario, trickster, and ideological stage-manager. He does not reverently usher in sacred material. Instead, he markets it, dilutes it, embellishes it, and knowingly hybridizes it. When he tells the audience that myths are "not everyone's cup of tea," and that he will therefore "spice it up" with "our joys and sorrows" and "some real foreign stuff" (Mukherjee 536), he announces the method of the play itself: epic will be contaminated by history, and legend will be forced to share space with the contemporary world.

This may be regarded as a crucial formal move. A conventional mythological drama often asks for absorption, but Mukherjee's Ustad asks for alertness. Even when he sounds playful, he instructs the audience in how to watch. His direct address, his teasing of the "babujis," the musical interludes, the festoons, and the abrupt transitions from one representational plane to another all prevent the epic from settling into devotional inevitability. Mukherjee's use of song, placard, interruption, role-switching, and presentational commentary makes the theatrical event analytical rather than immersive in a purely emotional sense. The spectators are not asked to surrender to fate; they are asked to notice structure.

That structure is explicitly shaped by jatra. The note at the end of the play glosses jatra as a folk-theatre idiom of Eastern India in which conscience itself may "speak and sing on stage" (Mukherjee 577). Mukherjee does not merely borrow surface folk texture; he borrows a mode in which theatricality can externalize social contradiction. The Ustad's magic wand, the procession-like entrances, the chorus, and the curtain-borne labels are not ornamental. They create a public arena in which every event is already framed as an argument about how stories are made and how audiences are taught to read them.

The Ustad's authority is therefore two-fold. On one hand, he is an entertainer; on the other, he is the figure who repeatedly tries to police narrative coherence. He wants the show to move on. He wants roles to remain stable. He wants the dead to stop troubling the script. This makes him politically quite interesting: he is not simply the folk narrator but the administrator of permissible meaning. Even his looseness has limits. The frame that appears free, improvisatory, and carnivalesque is also a battlefield over interpretation. That is why the jatra-like structure matters so much. It turns the act of narration into a visible social process.

Mukherjee's boldest revision is his reconstitution of Mareech. In the *Ramayana* tradition, Mareech is remembered primarily for deception. Mukherjee restores to him interiority, reluctance, conscience, and political vulnerability. Far from being a straightforward demonic accomplice, Mareech lives in retreat, outside Ravana's court, and has been transformed by his encounter with Rama. He says, with startling simplicity, "I have offered Him my devotion" (Mukherjee 541). That line alone overturns any easy opposition between divine hero and demonic villain. Mareech is already divided before Ravana's scheme ever reaches him.

Kalnemi and Ravana therefore do not recruit a willing agent; they pressure an unstable subject already estranged from his assigned identity. Kalnemi names precisely what makes Mareech useful: "With your skill in creating illusions / You will lure away the brothers" (Mukherjee 542). Illusion here is not merely theatrical craft. It is labour conscripted by sovereign power. Mareech's talent becomes exploitable technique. In that sense, his tragedy is neither metaphysical nor simply moral. It is political. He possesses a specialized capacity that authority can weaponize.

This is why Mareech's later self-questioning is so devastating: "Why did I master this art / Of working illusions?" (Mukherjee 553). The lament is more than personal remorse. It reveals the play's

larger concern with the disastrous afterlife of skill under domination. Mareech is tragic not because he is ontologically evil or fatefully cursed, but because his abilities become useful to a system he does not govern. Mukherjee thereby rewrites tragedy as coerced functionality. A minor epic figure is made to stand for those technicians, enforcers, functionaries, and intermediaries whose labour sustains larger structures while leaving them morally shattered.

At the same time, Mukherjee refuses to absolve Mareech entirely. The play does not flatten victimhood into innocence. Mareech knows what Ravana intends; he is horrified, but he still participates. His hope that death at Rama's hands will bring salvation later appears as a compromised ethical calculation, not a pure redemption. That complexity is one of the play's major achievements. Mareech is neither villain nor martyr in any simple sense. He is a politically manipulated figure whose tragedy lies in the gap between partial insight and failed resistance. Mukherjee's revision thus displaces the moral center of the *Ramayana* episode: the question is no longer only what Ravana does, but how lesser figures are pressured into enabling what they distrust.

The modern plots are not detachable topical insertions; they are the play's interpretive machinery. Mukherjee builds two contemporary sequences that mirror and refract the mythic action: the rural Bengal plot around Ishwar, Nayeb, Pal Babu, and Raghunath, and the geopolitical plot around Gregory, Macky, Williams, America, and war. In both cases, authority does not simply command. It manufactures conditions under which others internalize, rationalize, or perform the command.

In the rural plot, the landlord-state nexus is exposed with brutal clarity. Nayeb's political logic is not ideological in the abstract; it is agrarian and material. The near-harvest crop must be secured, peasant solidarity must be broken, and communal antagonism must be incited so that class conflict is displaced into riot. Mukherjee compresses the whole violence of landed power into a single obscene principle: when

peasants produce, they may work, but when harvest is due, "the right is solely with the owner of the land" (Mukherjee 544). That line is the play's agrarian manifesto in miniature. It reveals how law, property, and morality are coordinated to convert labor into dispossession.

The parallel with Mareech is exact. Just as Ravana exploits Mareech's illusion-making, Pal Babu's network exploits Ishwar's muscle and social location. The point is not merely that the oppressed are used by the powerful; it is that systems survive by recruiting mediators from among those closest to the violence. Ishwar is valuable because he can translate elite interest into local action. His refusal, like Mareech's reluctance, is what throws the machinery into crisis.

The American plot repeats the same structure in a different register. Gregory's hesitation about war is met not with argument but with patriotic blackmail, professional pressure, and the management of reputation. The play's most concise anti-imperial statement comes when Gregory protests that "It's America that's gone poking its nose around" (Mukherjee 548). The line punctures the inflated defensive language of national honor. America is not the injured innocent it claims to be; it is the intruder that narrates its aggression as moral necessity.

Mukherjee's critique deepens when the discourse turns to democracy. The rhetoric of freedom is never absent, but it is always contaminated by threat. Macky and Williams repeatedly invoke rights, patriotic duty, responsible journalism, and national reputation, yet every invocation carries coercive force. The play shows democracy functioning not as emancipatory practice but as legitimating speech for war, censorship, and disciplinary incorporation. That critique becomes explicit in the grotesquely polite chorus line, "We, the caretakers of democracy," who extend their hands not only for freedom and justice but also "for power and for plunder" (Mukherjee 550). No interpretive gloss is required: democracy is presented as a rhetorical costume worn by predatory power.

In both modern plots, then, Mukherjee attacks the same mechanism. Whether the language is royal command, landlord right, communal protection, or democratic obligation, authority survives by making exploitation appear dutiful, necessary, or sacred. The mythic and modern worlds are not analogies but doubles. Ravana, Pal Babu, and the American state differ in scale and vocabulary, yet they all employ pressure, spectacle, and moralized necessity to conscript others into their projects.

The “Meri Baba” sequence radicalizes this critique by condensing America into a comic-devouring deity. Mukherjee’s own closing note glosses “Meri Baba” as indicating “American” (Mukherjee 577), and the song turns that gloss into a symbolic structure of appetite, seduction, and occupation. Meri Baba is not represented first as armies or presidents, but as appetite itself: grab, gobble, take, enter, rearrange. The figure brags about penetration into domestic space and intimate life. Its key boast, “The whole world in my fist” (Mukherjee 549), transforms geopolitical domination into a grotesque salesman’s flourish. Empire appears as portable possession.

What makes the sequence especially powerful is its tonal doubleness. Meri Baba offers lullabies, comfort, and domestic service even as it prepares dispossession. This is not conquest by naked force alone. It is conquest by seduction, assistance, convenience, and dependency. The symbol therefore exceeds a simple anti-American slogan. Meri Baba names a whole political economy in which external power enters the home as helper, donor, protector, or partner, then rearranges the house so thoroughly that the old occupants no longer even know “whom to blame” (Mukherjee 550). Consent and coercion become indistinguishable.

The role of conscience sharpens this analysis. Mukherjee uses the jatra convention of conscience not as allegorical decoration but as counter-ideological speech. Conscience repeatedly interrupts action to name the trap in which characters live. Its most incisive warning

is addressed not to one individual alone but to all who have begun to internalize command: "It's their beat you have to march to, / It's their tune you have to sing" (Mukherjee 552). This is one of the play's most Brechtian moments. The line translates ideology into rhythm. Power does not only issue orders; it dictates tempo, choreography, habit, and repetition. One obeys before one thinks.

This is why illusion is the play's master metaphor. The golden deer is one version of illusion, but not the only one. There are also curtains, placards, masks, cut-outs, patriotic slogans, "rights and duties" chants, democratic lectures, police costumes, and the staging itself. Mukherjee shows that illusion is not fundamentally falsehood opposed to truth; it is the medium by which power organizes perception. Mareech's skill is theatrical, but so is the state's. Political authority and stagecraft converge in the management of appearance.

At the same time, the play insists that theatre can expose the very illusions it also produces. Mukherjee's answer to the misuse of performance is not anti-theatrical purity. It is counter-performance. Songs unmask slogans; chorus comments unmask propaganda; conscience unmasks obedience; metatheatre unmasks mythic closure. The play's formal brilliance lies in this reversal: the same theatricality that enables deception can also become an instrument of cognition.

The final appearance of Valmiki seems to be the play's most audacious gesture because it does not simply reinterpret the epic from outside; it cross-examines the epic's putative author from within the play. The Ustad and assistants summon Valmiki to settle the matter, which means to restore authority, stabilize meaning, and close the scandal opened by Mareech's complaint. But once Valmiki arrives, closure fails. The author is not permitted to remain immune from history.

At first, Valmiki reacts with irritation, impatience, and canonical confidence. He seems prepared to treat death as inevitable narrative order. Yet Mukherjee stages a gradual transformation. Mareech's

question is not whether death exists, but whether his assigned death was the only imaginable one. Gregory and Ishwar extend the question into the modern world: could one have resisted differently, spoken earlier, died otherwise, or refused the script of honorable submission? This is the crucial shift. Mukherjee does not merely ask whether the story was told correctly. He asks whether the story itself has normalized expendability.

Valmiki's most striking concession comes when the argument turns to class and sovereignty. Under pressure, he articulates the logic he is being forced to confront: "Rama or Ravana are both kings: they are bound to be oppressors or exploiters!" (Mukherjee 575). The line is not a flat doctrinal slogan; it is a metatheatrical rupture inside epic discourse. What matters is that such a statement can now be said in Valmiki's presence. Mukherjee does not destroy the canonical poet; he historicizes him. The epic no longer stands above contest. It becomes answerable to the dead and half-dead whom its moral architecture left insufficiently heard.

That final movement clarifies the entire play. *Mareech, the Legend* is revisionist not merely because it sympathizes with a demon, but because it changes the unit of moral analysis. The major antagonism is not Rama versus Ravana, good king versus bad king, or nation versus enemy. It is power versus those it scripts into usefulness. Mareech, Gregory, and Ishwar are linked because each confronts an authority that wants obedience dressed up as necessity. Their differences matter, but their structural position matters more.

The ending refuses neat tragic closure. Valmiki tells the Ustad that this is not the sort of play one should "end in a hurry" because it must "go on through lots of ups and downs, wins and losses and deaths" (Mukherjee 576). That is the play's final political wisdom. History does not stop when performance ends, and moral clarity does not arrive simply because an author appears. Mukherjee's theatre therefore leaves us with an unsettling but urgent proposition: the real danger

is not only tyranny in its obvious form, but the ordinary willingness to perform someone else's script while calling it duty, democracy, patriotism, survival, or art.

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Existential Nihilism in Forging The Fate: O' Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

Pangeijam Sanjeev

ABSTRACT

Existential nihilism itself is rather a critical terminology that has a certain inherent ambiguousness about it. Generally, it refers to such notions as life has no intrinsic meaning, value or purpose but rather a despairing, sorrowful and catastrophic condition. If it is confined to such technical or general definition, there can be no other interpretation for it outside and beyond the above said points. But a modern aesthetics of existential nihilism has evolved through the passionate involvement of metaphysical and cosmic anguish. O' Neill, the playwright who lived the tragedy he wrote projects the concept of existential nihilism in thematic effort in his play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Thematically, he was drawn towards his preoccupation with humanitarianism. His humanitarianism is the outcome of the blood and tears of his life. The absence of love and loss of faith in the inscrutable force within the dramatic personae of *Long Day's Journey into Night* highlights the imbibed existential nihilism of his self. This play has exposed the tragic core of the Tyrones by disclosing the existential forces which crush the faith. It reveals the backdrop of the death wish of the Tyrones which is more than a justification for the fate of the modern man are forged by the embodiment of existential nihilism.

Keywords: existential, nihilism, fate, tragedy, psychic

The philosophy of existential nihilism had undergone profound changes from the last half of 20th century. It shows a radical shift from searching objectives truth or divine manifestation towards subjective address like emotional instability, alienation, sense of rootlessness and psychic trauma. Man has lost the grounding share of traditional beliefs, collective correlations and mass beliefs rather they are enveloped by the feeling of suspension in an abyss surrounded by his own overwhelm existential finitude, and ultimate absurdity. This sensation of tragedy was clearly evident from the time of Shakespeare and Marlowe which had shifted the tragic flaw from the character to the society in the later period. But in this contemporary modern world, the tragedy is neither derived from the Elizabethan character nor the later period's society; it is in the psyche of man. So the mental conflict of tragedy is basically psychic and experiential. This is largely due to the subconsciousness of the conflict between opposite perspectives inside the modern man's psyche. Such psychotic dilemma of contemporary man in this hectic world is portrayed penetratingly in many of the contemporary plays. There are evidences of tragic occurrence due to the loss of faith, belief and social norms in many of these plays. Most of the play depicts the lost and lonely characters any hope of finding themselves through their centuries old shared social patterns of practice, convention, faith and belief. This tragic experience due to this existential nihilism is felt within the contemporary man of this century.

The pitiable image which mirrors modern man's existential nihilism and anxiety has started featuring in many literary works among the contemporary writers and playwrights. With this turmoil of tragic anguish, Eugene O'Neill depicts in many of his plays the existential nihilism of man which sprouted from modern man's loss of faith, sense of belongingness, feelings of emptiness and void. So, in this era of nihilism, divine intervention of God's work is questioned and if human story is to be narrated, it would be based on hollowness, emptiness and futility. As John Gassner has once pointed out that O'Neill's existentialist sense developed from the fear of his failure

to locate any soothing meaning of life in the world and so most of his works have depicted this with piercing insight into the psychic realm. Despite his set back to find a reassuring meaning of human life on earth and his compliance of failure, existentialism seems to be the core of his playwright's essence. He highlighted man's futile struggle against fate as the magnanimous action for it could exhibit his psychic preoccupation. To locate the core of the psychic mentality of the existential nihilism, a comprehensive study of the characters of this age is pertinent. No conceptual and structured attempt to define and identify the existential nihilism in literary work can be said to present until Murray Krieger's critical essay "Tragedy and the Tragic Vision" was published in 1958. It was an innovating critical endeavour to outline and identify the existential nihilism in the light of tragedy. Another important study on this topic was Charles Glickberg's *Tragic Vision in the Twentieth Century Literature* published in 1963. His work emphasised very notably how the psyche of the 20th century expressed its essence of existential nihilism in tragedy. But in spite of the profound concentration on this theme, it is not easy to specify existential nihilism as the root cause of the tragedy in contemporary human life. From this point of view of Charles Glickberg, the psyche of the twentieth century man revealed a complex, closely knitted mentality of Promethean defiance and Sisyphean despair. These discord and divergence are the root cause of existential nihilism which resulted in the tragedy of modern man.

Even though Murray Krieger's concept of tragedy arises from existential nihilism, it is confined and limited to be accepted in its totality, he however comprehends that it may be feasible to identify existential nihilism by eliminating from formalistic aesthetics to the thematic of tragedy. Further it is observed that existential nihilism was inherent inside tragedy, as a part and as the psychic mentality of the characters. The essence was deliberation in the domain of the thematic of the tragedy. These facts show very vividly that the existential nihilism in the twentieth century tragedy is practically the

Dionysian concept that the contemporary man is totally lost for there is no spiritual redemption.

One of the most arduous tasks of the modern man tragedy is how to live life meaningfully regardless of the void and nothingness. This insight of issue of existence in the face of nothingness emerges the sense of existential nihilism. When a man realised his drawback to perceive what existed beyond his control, the tragic strain started to inflict in his psyche. Man is neither competent of spiritual realisation nor the aesthetics of mysticism. His yearning for a meaning in the futile world always resulted into confusion within himself. There is neither any structure nor pattern of values with which he can identify himself with or belong to. Thus these notions and concepts become the tempering features of the character's fate and the playwright of the twentieth century tragedy. The character being the creation of the playwright, it is not possible to isolate the playwright's psyche of existential nihilism from the characters by overruling the Shakespearean concept of detachment and objectivity.

Grounding by this view O'Neill in his play, *Long Day's Journey into Night* attempts to mitigate the trauma of existential despair through a thematic study. In this play, he stripped men of their illusions to find a cure for their existential decay. O'Neill himself expressed it in his dedicatory note, "a play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood." Even if O'Neill was fascinated by the utilitarianism of the period and for him life was essentially not happy, he loved life passionately. Being a playwright his main objective of this play was to depict how tragedy is manifested in modern man's life and how it sanctifies the soul through realisation of emotions. This play reveals the background of Tyrone's family that nourished the death wish of a tormented existence, the paradoxical love- hate relationships between Tyrone Jr., his mother, his father James, and his younger brother Edmund.

In this play, James Tyrone's living room of the summer house is the main backdrop where four members of the Tyrone's slit, spite and

reprimand one another in a futile double bind. None of them achieved the jubilant exultation in the feud. They are all frustration, anguish and vulnerability; yet at the same time, they felt a strong connection between them in their frantic fury of rage. The fate of these four Tyrones is intertwined in an intricate way such that finding who is mainly responsible for the existential tragedy is near impossible. In fact, the problem lies in all the four Tyrones. But it is James Tyrone Sr. who intensified the trauma pattern resulting into existential tragedy. Even though he had acquired a quarter of a million dollars worth of property, he keep on whining he is broke. Moreover, his incessant desire for more money aggravated the situation to a dreadful junction. Moreover, because of Jamie, the alcoholic eldest son and Edmund, the youngest son afflicted with consumption resulted the Tyrones into a dishevelled family with frequent uproar and irritation among themselves. Mary, the mother who ceded to morphine addiction from enduring the birth of her last son and wrecked by her long years of wandering tour with her husband theatrical group, she succumbed to this formidable habit. Her drug addiction affected among the family members with host of accusation, self- reproach and contrition and divulged their emotional reciprocity and mutual reliance.

Finally, the Tyrones were conscious of their guilt for the wreckage of their life and its angonising realisation made them mute and vulnerable. But they failed to fix the cause to one particular reason rather it was very vague so they renounced themselves to faith. In this helplessness stage, Mary sank deeper into world of chimera and hallucination of dope in this play *Long day's Journey into Night*, O'Neill depicted Mary as a central character with the three Tyrones- James, Jamie and Edmund obsessively attached to her. She, though a docile and revered-like woman, Mary is not totally faultless for the family's mental psyche. She had two ardent desires- to be a nun or a concert pianist during her young years. But destiny did not favour her rather she fell for the sensual appeal of the young good looking romantic guy, James Tyrone. She then tied the nuptial bond with him which later on

resulted her to remain a tormented and repressed wife all her life. In this play, Edmund is overshadowed by the other Tyrones. Regarding his brother Jamie, his was also less colourful and dominated by the senior Tyrones. Since both the junior Tyrones were emotionally obsessed with the feeling of betrayal from the senior Tyrones, faith and religious sermon failed to provide them with spiritual consolation. The wants of understanding and love from the family lead them to alienation. The two juniors Jamie and Edmund were depicted as alienated and dejected characters throughout the play. Their sense of alienation was aggravated by their mother Mary, the neurotic woman who inducted in them a hope by imposing her belief in God. She had once remarked to Edmund in the play-

I never lied about anything once upon a
time. Now I have to lie, specially to
myself. But how can you understand,
when I don't myself...

This assertion to her son shows her spiritual dilemma which is in fact the cause of the Tyrones existential nihilism including herself. She placed her faith to the Tyrones that only spiritual person can hope. But as for the other Tyrones spiritualism is meaningless thing.

Thus opposite to what Mary Tyrone had believed, the other Tyrones had distasted her philosophy. Edmund leaning on Nietzsche's philosophy had said to his father once in the play that what is the use of hope in God if hope must come from the man himself. Both the Tyrones failed to find a resort in faith and spirituality and eventually alienation spring forth, this shows the cause of the crumbling of the mutual relationship and emotional attachment of the family resulting into the existential nihilism. The theme of existential nihilism is precisely the core of the tragedy of contemporary man as seen in this play *Long Day's Journey into Night*

It is in this realm of existential nihilism, the reality of the contemporary man's life is gripped and grind. It is this hollowness in whose jaws the characters of *Long Day's Journey into Night* are caught as they drifted down their life. James Tyrone's phobia of poverty leads him to economise on the healthcare of his family. A cheap quack had treated his wife Mary resulting her into drug addiction, his young son died of consumption at the state sanatorium for the poor. Thus, Modern man's life represented by the Tyrones is not a mere abstract presentation in this play; rather it is a meaningful social representation. The key to its potential meaning is catered by the fate resulting from the sense of existential nihilism in the characters. Thus, this play *Long Day's Journey into Night* has finally revealed the tragic core of the contemporary man by exposing the existential forces which grind the human faith and redefine salvation through despair.

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Ratan Thiyam and the Theatre of Movement: Body as Text in Modern Indian Drama

Sujeta Beishamayum

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Ratan Thiyam's concept of the Theatre of Movement, where the body functions as a primary text in modern Indian drama. Moving beyond dialogue-centred realism, Thiyam employs gesture, rhythm, silence, ritual movement, martial discipline, and collective choreography to communicate psychological depth, historical memory, and socio-political conflict. Rooted in indigenous performance traditions of Manipur yet globally resonant in appeal, his theatre creates a visual-poetic language that transforms performance into embodied thought. Through selected works such as *Chakravyuha* and *Nine Hills One Valley*, the paper argues that Thiyam redefined Indian stage aesthetics by privileging movement over speech. His dramaturgy demonstrates how the human body becomes a site of resistance, spirituality, and cultural identity in contemporary theatre practice.

Keywords: Ratan Thiyam; Theatre of Movement; Body as Text; Modern Indian Drama; Indigenous Aesthetics; Performance Studies

INTRODUCTION

Modern Indian theatre has undergone significant transformation through the efforts of playwrights and directors who sought to move beyond colonial theatrical conventions and literary realism.

Among the most influential figures in this development is Ratan Thiyam, whose innovative theatrical practice has redefined the aesthetics of contemporary Indian performance. Emerging from Manipur, Thiyam developed a unique theatre language that combines indigenous performance traditions with modern experimental techniques. Through the Chorus Repertory Theatre, he established a performance style distinguished by disciplined ensemble acting, ritualistic staging, choreographed movement, martial energy, and visual symbolism (Lal, 2004). His productions have received international recognition for their ability to communicate profound philosophical and socio-political concerns through bodily expression rather than dialogue-centred narration.

Movement has always occupied an important place in theatre traditions across cultures. From classical Greek drama and Asian ritual theatre to contemporary physical theatre, the body functions as a vital medium of communication. Indian performance traditions such as Kathakali, Ras Lila, and martial forms like Thang-Ta employ codified gestures, rhythm, and spatial movement to convey emotion, narrative, and spirituality (Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli, 1990). In modern theatre theory, movement is understood not merely as physical action but as a system of signs capable of producing meaning beyond verbal language. The body thus becomes performative text.

The concept of “body as text” suggests that the human body can function as a carrier of cultural memory, emotion, ideology, and identity. Performance theorists such as Richard Schechner and Antonin Artaud emphasize that gesture, silence, rhythm, and sensory intensity often communicate more powerfully than speech (Schechner, 2013; Artaud, 1958). In Thiyam’s theatre, movement is not ornamental but central to dramatic meaning. Through choreographed formations, ritual gestures, silence, and martial discipline, he transforms the stage into a space where bodies narrate suffering, conflict, resistance, and transcendence.

The primary objective of this paper is to examine how Ratan Thiyam uses movement as a theatrical language in selected productions such as *Chakravyuha* and *Nine Hills One Valley*. The paper explores how bodily expression functions as narrative structure, visual metaphor, and political commentary within his theatre practice. It further investigates the relationship between indigenous Manipuri aesthetics and modern performance theory in shaping his dramaturgy.

The scope of this study is limited to Thiyam's Theatre of Movement as an embodied performance practice within modern Indian drama. The paper primarily focuses on movement, gesture, ritual choreography, and ensemble performance rather than textual or linguistic analysis alone. It argues that Thiyam redefined modern Indian theatre by privileging the body as a site of meaning, thereby creating an alternative theatrical language rooted in indigenous aesthetics and postcolonial cultural expression.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The emergence of modern Indian theatre after Independence marked a significant shift in the cultural and artistic landscape of India. Following 1947, theatre practitioners across the country began searching for dramatic forms that could reflect Indian realities rather than merely reproducing colonial theatrical models. Earlier urban theatre had largely depended on proscenium staging, realism, and Western dramaturgy. However, post-independence playwrights and directors increasingly attempted to develop an indigenous theatrical identity rooted in local histories, languages, folk traditions, and performative practices (Dharwadker, 2005). This period witnessed experimentation with new theatrical vocabularies that combined tradition with modernity.

One of the most influential developments during this period was the rise of regional theatre movements in different parts of India. Directors and dramatists from states such as Karnataka, Maharashtra, Bengal, and Manipur sought to reinterpret local cultural traditions

within contemporary theatre. This movement later came to be identified as the “Theatre of Roots,” a term popularized by Suresh Awasthi, who advocated a return to indigenous performance systems as a means of resisting cultural dependence on Western theatrical forms (Awasthi, 1989). Rather than imitating European realism, theatre practitioners began integrating folk performance, mythology, ritual, dance, music, and oral traditions into modern stage productions. This approach enabled Indian theatre to evolve as both culturally rooted and aesthetically experimental.

Within this larger context, Manipur developed a distinctive theatrical identity shaped by its rich performative heritage. Manipuri culture possesses a long tradition of ritualistic and community-oriented performances that merge spirituality, music, movement, and storytelling. Among the most important forms is Lai Haraoba, a ritual festival that reenacts creation myths through dance, music, and ceremonial movement. Similarly, Ras Lila, associated with Vaishnavite devotional traditions, combines lyrical movement, symbolic gestures, and rhythmic expression to communicate emotional and spiritual themes (Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli, 1990). Manipuri martial arts, especially Thang-Ta, contribute disciplined bodily movement, agility, and martial choreography that later became central to theatrical performance. Music, drumming, and choral singing also play crucial roles in shaping the rhythmic and collective dimensions of Manipuri theatre.

It was within this culturally vibrant environment that Ratan Thiyam established the Chorus Repertory Theatre in 1976 at Imphal. The institution became one of the most important experimental theatre spaces in India. More than a performance troupe, Chorus Repertory Theatre functioned as a centre for rigorous actor training, collective living, and artistic experimentation. Thiyam developed a unique theatre methodology based on ensemble discipline, physical training, ritual movement, visual imagery, and indigenous aesthetics (Sen and

Nagpal, 2006). His productions emphasized the body as a medium of expression rather than depending solely on spoken dialogue.

Thiyam's contribution to Indian and world theatre is profound. He successfully demonstrated that regional performance traditions could engage universal concerns such as war, violence, morality, displacement, and human suffering. Productions such as *Chakravyuha* and *Nine Hills One Valley* received national and international acclaim for their visual power, philosophical depth, and innovative use of movement. By combining traditional Manipuri aesthetics with modern theatrical experimentation, Thiyam expanded the possibilities of contemporary theatre and established an intercultural performance language that resonates across national boundaries (Mee, 2008).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of the “body as text” occupies a central place in performance studies and contemporary theatre theory, particularly in discussions of physical theatre, ritual performance, and embodied aesthetics. Unlike literary criticism, which privileges written language as the primary source of meaning, performance studies emphasizes the body, gesture, movement, space, and sensory experience as important modes of communication (Schechner, 2013). In theatre, the actor's body functions not merely as a physical presence but as a signifying medium capable of producing emotional, cultural, political, and philosophical meanings. This framework is particularly relevant to the theatre of Ratan Thiyam, whose productions foreground movement and embodiment over dialogue-centred narration.

Performance studies, as developed by Richard Schechner, expands the understanding of theatre beyond scripted drama to include ritual, ceremony, bodily behaviour, and social enactment. Schechner's concept of “restored behaviour,” refers to repeated and culturally coded actions performed within specific contexts (Schechner, 2013). In Thiyam's productions, ritualized gestures, martial movements, and ensemble choreography function as restored behaviours rooted

in Manipuri cultural traditions. These movements communicate collective memory and inherited cultural identity while engaging contemporary social concerns.

The semiotics of the body in theatre further explains how bodily movement operates as a system of signs. Gestures, posture, facial expressions, rhythm, and spatial relationships convey meaning even in the absence of speech. The body therefore becomes a readable text. In Thiyam's Theatre of Movement, silence itself acquires communicative force. The actor's body expresses grief, conflict, fear, spirituality, or resistance through movement patterns rather than verbal explanation. Thiyam's productions frequently employ silence, slow movement, synchronized formations, and ritual gestures to evoke emotional and symbolic meaning. The audience interprets these visual signs through sensory and cultural engagement.

Theories of embodiment and body memory are equally important in understanding Thiyam's dramaturgy. Embodiment refers to the body as a site of lived experience, perception, memory, and identity. Cultural practices, rituals, and historical experiences become inscribed within bodily behaviour. In Manipuri performance traditions such as Lai Haraoba and Thang-Ta, movement carries inherited memory and community consciousness (Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli, 1990). Thiyam transforms these embodied traditions into contemporary theatrical expression, allowing the body to function as a repository of collective history and trauma.

Ritual theory further illuminates the spiritual dimensions of Thiyam's theatre. Ritual performances often transcend ordinary narrative structures and create symbolic spaces for transformation, remembrance, and communal participation. Antonin Artaud argued that theatre should communicate through sensory intensity, gesture, rhythm, and symbolic action rather than depending solely on literary dialogue (Artaud, 1958). Similarly, Jerzy Grotowski emphasized the disciplined actor's body as the essential instrument of theatre

(Grotowski, 2002). His concept of “Poor Theatre” minimized material excess and privileged physical training, concentration, and bodily precision. Thiyam’s actor training methods reflect comparable emphasis on bodily precision, breath control, martial movement, and ensemble coordination.

From a postcolonial perspective, Thiyam’s theatre also resists the dominance of Western realist conventions by foregrounding indigenous aesthetics and embodied cultural forms. His Theatre of Movement demonstrates that the body can communicate political conflict, historical trauma, spirituality, and collective identity beyond verbal language, creating an alternative theatrical language rooted in cultural memory and postcolonial self-expression.

RATAN THIYAM’S THEATRE OF MOVEMENT:

CORE ANALYSIS

Gesture and Silence

One of the defining characteristics of Ratan Thiyam’s theatrical practice is his powerful use of gesture and silence as primary modes of dramatic expression. Unlike conventional realist theatre, which depends heavily on dialogue and verbal exchange, Thiyam constructs meaning through stillness, bodily rhythm, facial expression, and choreographed pauses to communicate emotional and philosophical depth. Silence in his theatre is not a passive absence; rather, a performative force that generates tension, contemplation, and emotional intensity.

Gestures in Thiyam’s productions are highly stylized and carefully choreographed. Influenced by Manipuri ritual performance and classical movement traditions, these gestures function symbolically rather than naturalistically. A slow raising of the arm, a bowed torso, or the turning of the head may signify mourning, surrender, fear, or spiritual invocation. Such movements require active interpretation from the audience, transforming theatre into a visual and sensory

experience rather than a purely verbal one. In productions such as *Chakravyuha*, silence frequently intensifies the emotional experience of conflict and suffering. The absence of speech allows the audience to focus on the physicality of pain, exhaustion, and impending violence (Thiyam, 1998).

Thiyam's use of silence also reflects ritual aesthetics. Silence creates contemplative spaces within performance where movement acquires heightened significance. The pause between actions often becomes as meaningful as the action itself. This approach resonates with Antonin Artaud's idea that theatre should communicate through gesture, rhythm, sound, and sensory intensity rather than relying solely on language (Artaud, 1958). Through silence and gesture, Thiyam creates an embodied theatrical language that transcends linguistic barriers and communicates directly through sensory perception.

Martial Discipline and Ensemble Movement

Another major aspect of Thiyam's Theatre of Movement is the incorporation of martial discipline and ensemble choreography. Manipuri martial traditions, especially Thang-Ta, significantly shape the physical vocabulary of his theatre. Thang-Ta combines combat techniques with rhythmic bodily movement, agility, concentration, and spiritual discipline. In Thiyam's productions, martial movement is transformed into theatrical expression that symbolizes conflict, discipline, collective identity, and resistance.

The actors in Chorus Repertory Theatre undergo rigorous physical training that emphasizes coordination, breath control, balance, and rhythmic precision. As a result, ensemble movement becomes one of the most striking visual features of his theatre. Actors move collectively in synchronized formations, creating visual patterns that resemble waves, circles, military structures, or ritual processions. These formations communicate social unity, communal suffering, or collective struggle without explanatory dialogue.

In *Chakravyuha*, for instance, the rotating body formations recreate the military labyrinth from the Mahabharata. The ensemble does not merely represent soldiers; rather, their coordinated movement becomes the labyrinth itself. The actors' bodies form moving walls that surround and trap Abhimanyu, visually embodying the inevitability of violence and entrapment (Thiyam, 1998). Through rhythmic stomping, martial gestures, and coordinated bodily movements, war is represented not only as narrative content but as a physical experience.

The precision of ensemble movement also reflects discipline and collective consciousness. Unlike individualistic performance traditions that prioritize the star actor, Thiyam emphasizes communal bodily expression. The ensemble functions as a unified organism where individual identity merges into collective rhythm. This approach resembles Jerzy Grotowski's emphasis on disciplined actor training and the physical transformation of performance (Grotowski, 2002). However, Thiyam's ensemble movement remains deeply rooted in Manipuri martial and ritual traditions.

Ritual and Spiritual Movement

Ritual and spirituality form the philosophical foundation of Thiyam's dramaturgy. His productions frequently employ ceremonial processions, circular movement patterns, meditative choreography, invocatory gestures, and repetitive rhythms that evoke sacred performance traditions. These elements derive from Manipuri cultural practices such as Lai Haraoba and Ras Lila, where dance, music, and ritual enactment function as forms of spiritual communication (Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli, 1990).

Circular movement is particularly significant in Thiyam's theatre. Circular formations symbolize continuity, cosmic order, collective unity, and cyclical time. Unlike linear narrative progression associated with Western realism, ritual movement in Thiyam's productions creates a sense of timelessness and spiritual repetition. Processions often resemble ceremonial journeys, while repetitive gestures

produce meditative intensity. Such movements transform the stage into a ritual space where theatre becomes an act of reflection and communal participation.

Invocation is another important aspect of spiritual movement in his productions. Performers frequently enter the stage through slow ceremonial movement accompanied by drumming, chanting, or rhythmic breathing. These invocatory actions establish an atmosphere of sacred concentration before dramatic action begins. The body thereby functions as both theatrical instrument and spiritual medium.

Thiyam's meditative choreography encourages inward reflection. Slow and controlled movements encourage spectators to contemplate rather than merely consume theatrical spectacle. Silence, rhythmic breathing, and restrained gestures create emotional concentration and spiritual resonance. This ritualistic approach aligns with Richard Schechner's understanding of performance as behaviour linked to ritual, transformation, and cultural memory (Schechner, 2013).

Moreover, ritual movement allows Thiyam to connect local traditions with universal philosophical concerns. Themes of mortality, suffering, ethical conflict, and spiritual transcendence become embodied through ritual choreography. Thus, movement in his theatre becomes both aesthetic expression and spiritual inquiry.

Space, Light, Costume, and Visual Language

Movement in Thiyam's theatre cannot be separated from scenography, lighting, costume, and visual composition. His productions are known for their striking visual aesthetics in which every element of stage design interacts dynamically with bodily movement. The stage becomes a living visual landscape where space, light, sound, and movement collectively produce meaning.

Spatial arrangement plays a central role in his theatrical language. Bodies are positioned in circles, diagonals, clusters, and elevated formations that symbolize power relationships, emotional tension, or communal interaction. Empty space is often used strategically to

intensify isolation or anticipation. Movement across space generates visual rhythm and emotional progression.

Lighting further shapes the emotional atmosphere of performance. Focused illumination, shadows, and dimly lit spaces heighten the dramatic tension and psychology intensity. Light often isolates individual bodies within darkness, emphasizing loneliness, suffering, or spiritual introspection. In scenes of conflict, shifting light patterns create instability and visual fragmentation. Lighting thus participates actively in the movement vocabulary itself.

Costumes amplify bodily expression and reinforce thematic symbolism. Flowing garments amplify bodily gestures, while martial costumes reinforce discipline and collective identity. Colours frequently carry symbolic meanings associated with spirituality, violence, mourning, or purification. The interaction between costume and movement creates visual poetry on stage.

Thiyam's theatre often communicates through symbolic visual composition. Images created through collective movement often function metaphorically. Rows of bent bodies may symbolize oppression; synchronized marching may evoke militarization; stillness surrounded by movement may suggest alienation or contemplation. Such visual compositions communicate complex meanings beyond verbal dialogue. This integration of movement and scenography reflects a holistic theatrical vision in which the body interacts continuously with the visual environment. Theatre becomes a multisensory experience where movement, light, sound, costume, and space merge into a unified performance language (Lal, 2004).

Body as Resistance

A major dimension of Thiyam's Theatre of Movement is the representation of the body as a site of resistance. His productions engage themes of war, violence, displacement, and social fragmentation. However, these themes are rarely communicated through direct

political speeches. Instead, the body itself becomes the medium through which trauma, resilience, and resistance are expressed.

In productions such as *Chakravyuha* and *Nine Hills One Valley*, bodies under physical strain symbolize the destructive consequences of conflict. Repeated falls, exhausted movement, constrained gestures, and chaotic formations embody fear, suffering, and entrapment. The audience witnesses violence not merely as narrative content but as physical experience. The wounded body becomes a visual testimony to collective trauma.

At the same time, movement also represents resilience and survival. Even in moments of defeat, bodies continue to rise, march, and perform ritual action. This persistence suggests the endurance of human spirit despite violence and instability. Through disciplined ensemble movement, Thiyam portrays collective solidarity against fragmentation and oppression.

The body in his theatre also functions as a postcolonial and cultural statement. By foregrounding indigenous movement traditions, Thiyam resists the dominance of Western theatrical realism and reclaims local cultural identity. The disciplined Manipuri body becomes a repository of cultural memory and resistance against erasure (Bharucha, 1993).

Furthermore, Thiyam's Theatre of Movement transcends linguistic and geographical boundaries. Because bodily expression communicates beyond spoken language, audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds can engage emotionally and intellectually with his productions. The body thus becomes a universal language of suffering, spirituality, conflict, and hope.

Ultimately, Thiyam transforms movement into a profound political and philosophical medium. His theatre demonstrates that the human body is not merely an object on stage but a living text capable of expressing memory, resistance, identity, and collective humanity.

PRODUCTION ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PLAYS

Chakravyuha

Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha* is among the strongest examples of his Theatre of Movement, where bodily expression, silence, and ensemble choreography replace conventional dialogue-centred narration. Based on the Mahabharata episode of Abhimanyu's entry into the Chakravyuha battle formation, the production transforms epic narrative into an embodied theatrical experience. Meaning is constructed through rhythm, ritualized gestures, spatial design, and collective movement rather than verbal exposition (Thiyam, 1998).

One of the most striking scenes is the formation of the Chakravyuha itself. Through synchronized bodily movement, the ensemble creates rotating circular formations that transform the stage into a living military labyrinth. Rhythmic stamping, shifting formations, and repetitive motion visually communicate entrapment and impending destruction. The audience comprehends the danger of the Chakravyuha through corporeal imagery rather than descriptive dialogue. The ensemble thereby becomes both scenic structure and symbolic representation of war.

Abhimanyu's entrance into battle is similarly conveyed through movement rather than heroic speeches. Rapid footwork, defensive gestures, leaps, and gradual physical exhaustion communicate his courage, confusion, and vulnerability. The actor's body externalizes psychological conflict, allowing spectators to experience war as an embodied reality rather than an abstract event. Silence intensifies this experience. Before moments of violence, performers often remain motionless, creating pauses charged with emotional tension. Such stillness heightens anticipation and reflects Antonin Artaud's belief that theatre should communicate through sensory and physical intensity rather than literary dialogue (Artaud, 1958).

Manipuri martial traditions, particularly Thang-Ta, strongly shape the production's movement vocabulary. Bodies advance and retreat in

coordinated patterns resembling ritual combat. Martial choreography thus becomes a visual expression of collective violence and discipline. The climax of the play further demonstrates Thiyam's movement-based dramaturgy. Abhimanyu's death is represented through slowing bodily rhythms, collapsing formations, and ritualized mourning gestures rather than verbal lamentation. The image of fallen bodies in suspended silence produces profound emotional impact, transforming tragedy into a visual and corporeal experience.

Through these scenes, *Chakravyuha* demonstrates how movement can function as narrative, symbolism, and emotional expression simultaneously. The production reveals Thiyam's ability to transform the human body into a medium capable of articulating conflict, suffering, and collective memory.

Nine Hills One Valley

Included in *Manipur Trilogy*, *Nine Hills One Valley* extends Ratan Thiyam's exploration of movement-based dramaturgy into the socio-political realities of Manipur. The play reflects tensions among diverse communities and examines themes of fragmentation, coexistence, and reconciliation. Rather than relying on direct political discourse, Thiyam communicates these concerns through spatial arrangement, ritual action, and ensemble choreography (Thiyam, 2008).

A central feature of the production is the use of bodily formations to represent divided social identities. Different groups of performers move according to distinct rhythms and choreographic patterns, symbolizing separate communities and cultural experiences. Spatial separation on stage visually expresses alienation and conflict. Contrasting tempos and directional movements create physical tension, allowing audiences to perceive social fragmentation through visual composition rather than political dialogue.

Ritual processions and slow choreographed movement sequences communicate displacement and uncertainty. Bodies moving silently across dimly lit spaces evoke fear, instability, and collective

suffering. Instead of dramatizing violence directly, Thiyam conveys psychological trauma through repetitive movement and restrained physical expression. The atmosphere of the performance remains contemplative rather than overtly dramatic.

An important moment in the production occurs when separated groups gradually converge into synchronized ensemble movement. Fragmented formations slowly transform into coordinated choreography, symbolizing the possibility of coexistence and communal harmony. This bodily unification functions as a metaphor for social negotiation and reconciliation without relying on ideological speeches.

Silence again becomes a powerful theatrical device. Extended pauses between movements create spaces for reflection, while drums and ritual chants continue in the background. These moments generate meditative intensity and reinforce the spiritual dimension of the performance. Circular formations, invocation gestures, and ceremonial rhythms derived from Manipuri traditions connect political conflict with ritual reflection and collective memory.

Visual imagery also plays a crucial role in the production. Bodies arranged in clusters, lines, and circular formations create symbolic stage pictures that communicate emotional and political meanings. Lighting and costume interact with movement to intensify these effects, producing a unified visual language.

Ultimately, *Nine Hills One Valley* demonstrates Thiyam's capacity to transform movement into political and philosophical expression. Through ritual choreography, ensemble movement, and visual symbolism, the production communicates conflict, suffering, and reconciliation beyond the limits of spoken language.

CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN INDIAN DRAMA

Ratan Thiyam has made a profound contribution to modern Indian drama by redefining theatrical language through movement, ritual,

and visual symbolism. At a time when much of modern Indian theatre remained influenced by literary realism and dialogue-centred dramaturgy, Thiyam foregrounded the body as the principal medium of expression. Through gesture, silence, martial choreography, music, and ensemble movement, he expanded the possibilities of theatrical communication beyond spoken language (Schechner, 2013). His productions established theatre as a visual, sensory, and philosophical experience rather than merely a literary performance.

One of Thiyam's most significant achievements lies in his integration of indigenous aesthetics into contemporary theatre. Drawing from the rich performative traditions of Manipur—including Lai Haraoba, Ras Lila, martial arts, ritual processions, and choral music—he created a distinct theatrical language rooted in local culture yet universally accessible (Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli, 1990). His work challenged the assumption that regional or traditional forms were incompatible with modern theatre. Instead, he demonstrated that indigenous performance traditions could engage global audiences while retaining cultural specificity. Productions such as *Chakravyuha* and *Manipur Trilogy* received international recognition for their visual intensity, spiritual depth, and innovative stagecraft (Mee, 2008).

Thiyam's theatre also contributed to the decolonisation of stage practice. By resisting dependence on Western realist conventions and privileging indigenous movement vocabularies, ritual aesthetics, and collective performance structures, he reclaimed theatrical expression from colonial cultural frameworks (Bharucha, 1993). His theatre foregrounded embodied cultural memory and postcolonial identity.

Furthermore, through the Chorus Repertory Theatre, Thiyam influenced younger theatre practitioners by emphasizing physical training, ensemble discipline, and intercultural performance, thereby shaping contemporary experimental theatre in India and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Ratan Thiyam's Theatre of Movement represents one of the most original and influential contributions to modern Indian drama. His dramaturgy fundamentally redefines theatrical communication by treating the body as text, where gesture, silence, rhythm, posture, ritual choreography, and ensemble formations function as carriers of meaning. In his productions, the body does not merely support spoken dialogue; rather, it becomes the primary medium through which emotions, memory, spirituality, violence, and collective experience are expressed. Through works such as *Chakravyuha* and *Nine Hills One Valley*, Thiyam demonstrates that movement itself can narrate conflict, suffering, resistance, and transcendence more powerfully than words alone.

Movement in Thiyam's theatre also functions as both philosophical and political language. Drawing from the indigenous performance traditions of Manipur, including ritual dance, martial arts, music, and ceremonial movement, he creates a theatrical form rooted in cultural memory and spiritual consciousness. At the same time, his productions engage contemporary socio-political realities such as war, violence, fragmentation, and displacement. Through disciplined bodily expression and collective choreography, Thiyam transforms the stage into a space where political trauma and ethical reflection become physically visible. The body thus emerges as a site of resistance, resilience, and cultural identity.

The lasting relevance of Thiyam's theatre lies in its ability to transcend linguistic and geographical boundaries. In an era increasingly dominated by technology and visual media, his work reaffirms the unique power of live performance and embodied presence. His integration of indigenous aesthetics with experimental theatre continues to influence contemporary performance studies, intercultural theatre, and postcolonial dramaturgy. By privileging movement over verbal realism, Thiyam expanded the possibilities

of modern theatre and established an enduring model of embodied artistic expression in both Indian and world theatre traditions.

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Queering the Canon: A Study of the Jatra Tradition in Bengal

Swati Roy Chowdhury

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the structural and aesthetic mutations of Jatra, the traditional folk theatre form of Bengal, examining how its evolution from a sacred, rural ritual into a highly commercialized, late-twentieth-century and contemporary secular performance space opens up radical possibilities for a queer reading. By deploying Susan Sontag's foundational theories of Camp, Judith Butler's framework of gender performativity, and the intersectional feminist historiographies of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen, this study investigates a central paradox: how the inherent Camp aesthetic of modern Jatra—defined by stylization, hyper-theatricality, auditory and emotional excess, and spectacular character archetypes—allows it to function as a naturally queer genre, even when its explicit plots reinforce conventional, heteronormative, or didactic moralities. It traces how the historical figure of the *joker* (clown) and the *chhiti-gayan* (chorus), alongside the legendary tradition of the *bhratya* or *streerole* (male female-impersonators like Chapal Bhaduri), laid an affective foundation where gender and social hierarchies were inherently unstable.

Shifting into the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, commercial Jatra transformed its content to tackle sensational, political, and secular realities—such as the rise of Marxism, the ravages of globalization, and historical scandals—while stubbornly retaining

its archaic, operatic performance grammar. Through this aesthetic tension, the paper argues that modern Jatra's resistance to realism subverts the disciplinary structures of postcolonial respectability, transforming the rural-urban performance stage into a sanctuary for emotional excess, stylistic extravagance, and radical gender subversion.

Keywords: Jatra Tradition, Bengali Folk Theatre,
Camp Aesthetic, Gender Performativity,
Steerole, Vernacular Performance,
Postcolonial, Subversion.

THE SOUND AND FURY OF THE JATRA STAGE

The folk theatre tradition of Bengal, known as Jatra—literally meaning “to go” or “journey”—has historically operated as a kinetic, multi-sensory, and fundamentally democratic cultural form. Originating in the medieval period as an itinerant musical procession tethered to religious movements, most notably the ecstatic Vaishnava revivals spearheaded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the sixteenth century, Jatra was initially an act of collective devotion (*bhakti*). It was a performance that collapsed the distance between the divine and the mundane, unfolding not behind a proscenium arch but on the *asor*—a square, open-air earthen platform surrounded on all four sides by an immediate, highly vocal audience. This spatial arrangement dictated a specific performance grammar. To reach thousands of spectators sitting beneath the open sky without the aid of modern amplification, the Jatra actor had to rely on extreme physical extension, a high-pitched operatic vocal delivery, heavily stylized facial gestures, and an acoustic environment saturated with thunderous percussion and piercing brass instruments.

However, as Jatra transitioned into the late twentieth century and deep into the contemporary era, it underwent a profound structural transformation. The sacred mythologies of the *Krishna-jatra* or *Chandi-jatra* were largely supplanted by the commercial *palas*

(scripts) of a secularized, hyper-political, and sensational nature. The modern Jatra stage became an arena for dissecting the trauma of the Naxalite movement, the systemic changes of the Left Front regime in West Bengal, the rise of global capitalism, and immediate, highly sensationalized headlines ranging from cross-border espionage to local domestic scandals. Yet, an extraordinary paradox emerged within this commercial evolution: while the thematic content shifted toward the urgent, gritty prose of political and social realism, the *performance style* steadfastly refused the rules of realistic representation. Modern Jatra retained, and in many ways amplified, its historic commitment to flamboyant costumes, blindingly vivid makeup, larger-than-life character archetypes, agonizingly prolonged death scenes, and a relentless emotional excess that borders on the hysterical.

It is precisely within this gap between realistic, often conventional or didactic textuality and an aggressively unrealistic, hyperbolic performance style that the “queer” nature of Jatra resides. This paper argues that modern Jatra functions as an inherently queer genre through its systemic deployment of a folk-vernacular Camp aesthetic. By applying Susan Sontag’s formulation of Camp as a sensibility rooted in the love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration, alongside Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which exposes gender as a repeated, stylized act rather than an essential truth, we can see Jatra as an artistic form that systematically denaturalizes social and sexual normativity.

Furthermore, this inquiry roots itself in the material and historical realities of Bengal’s performance history by engaging with the interventions of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Bhattacharya’s recovery of the precarious histories of early actresses and public women on the Bengali stage, and Dev Sen’s analysis of subverted, marginalized feminine narratives in folk traditions, provide a necessary critical lens. They allow us to see how the marginalized body—whether the male *streerole* (female impersonator), the exploited commercial actress, or the hyper-melodramatic political martyr—uses

the Jatra arena to mount a rebellion against the sanitized, bourgeois morality of postcolonial respectability (*bhadralok* culture). Ultimately, this study seeks to answer: how does the structural and emotional excess of modern commercial Jatra allow it to “queer” the canon of South Asian performance, turning a popular, mass-market medium into a radical site of subversion?

SUSAN SONTAG’S CAMP AND THE AFFECTIVE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN JATRA

In her seminal 1964 essay *Notes on “Camp”*, Susan Sontag describes a unique aesthetic sensibility that prioritizes style over content, aesthetics over morality, and artifice over nature. For Sontag, Camp is characterized by a “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,” a vision of the world not in terms of beauty but in terms of the “degree of artifice, of stylization” (Sontag 1964, 515-516). Crucially, Sontag identifies that Camp is consistently drawn to the double entendre, the hyper-theatrical, and the “epicene” quality of things—where characters are drawn with exaggerated, archetypal strokes and actions are performed with an intensity that completely overshoots the literal demands of the plot. When we transpose Sontag’s Western, largely urban-queer formulation of Camp onto the vernacular landscape of modern commercial Jatra in Bengal, a striking, highly productive theoretical resonance emerges.

Modern Jatra is, by its very structural definition, an exercise in unmediated Camp. Let us consider the spatiality of the modern Jatra *asor*. Even when transported to massive, brightly lit commercial pavilions or rural festival grounds (*melas*), the stage remains a platform of pure exposure. The performance cannot rely on the atmospheric lighting, subtle set designs, or psychological interiority that define Western realist theatre or modern arthouse cinema. Instead, everything must be externalized. The characters do not merely enter the stage; they erupt onto it through the *ramp* (the long walkway cutting through the audience), preceded by deafening musical cues—

often featuring a jarring blend of traditional drums (*dholok*, *khol*) and Western synthesizers, trumpets, and electric guitars. The costumes are a riot of historical and contemporary anachronisms: political leaders in glittering, over-tailored suits, mythological villains in synthetic, sequined robes, and modern housewives in hyper-saturated, lustrous sarees accompanied by makeup so heavy it transforms the human face into a vivid, mask-like icon.

This aesthetic is not a failure of realism; it is a deliberate, joyful victory over it. Sontag notes that “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (Sontag 1964, 519). In modern Jatra, this operates on an institutional level. A political leader addressing a crowd in a contemporary political *pala* does not speak in conversational tones; they deliver a monologue laced with operatic high notes, rhythmic pauses, and sweeping physical gestures that evoke the grandeur of a Shakespearean monarch. The emotional registers of the performance are deliberately dialled to an extreme intensity. Grief is marked by body-shaking wails and physical collapses; anger is signalled by chest-thumping delivery and wide, unblinking stares; virtue is rendered so pristine it is denoted by a halo.

This hyper-theatricality functions as a queer mechanism because it completely disrupts the “naturalized” social codes of the spectator’s reality. By presenting political struggles, class warfare, and domestic crises through a lens of absolute artifice, Jatra exposes these real-world structures as highly constructed, performative systems. The excess of emotion—what J. Jeffrey Hanes, in his analysis of South Asian performative affects, links to the classical but mutated concept of *bhāva* (emotional states) as a site of visceral, transgressive transmission—creates an affective overload (Hanes 2025). This overload breaks down the rational, disciplined distance required by bourgeois spectatorship.

The spectator is not invited to calmly empathize with a character’s plight through a realistic portrayal; rather, they are subjected to an assault of pure performance. The sheer excess of the Jatra style

destabilizes the stable meanings of the text. A play might feature a highly conservative storyline—such as a virtuous daughter-in-law enduring immense suffering to preserve the sanctity of a patriarchal household—but the way she performs this suffering, with an explosive, larger-than-life operatic defiance, completely eclipses the submissive content of the script. The performance style is fundamentally anarchic; it celebrates the glorious triumphs of style, vocal stamina, and physical bravura over the disciplinary constraints of everyday reality, fulfilling Sontag's assertion that Camp is "the solvent of morality" that neutralizes moral indignation through the sheer joy of the spectacular (Sontag 1964, 523).

JUDITH BUTLER, GENDER PERFORMATIVITY, AND THE LEGACY OF THE *STREEROLE*

To fully understand how Jatra's Camp aesthetic operates as an inherently queering agent, one must look closely at its historical reliance on, and contemporary inheritance of, cross-dressing and gender impersonation. For centuries, Jatra was an exclusively male domain. Because the acting troupes were itinerant, traveling by boat or cart across remote districts, and because the social status of public performers was severely stigmatized, respectable women were strictly forbidden from joining the ranks. This material reality gave birth to one of Jatra's most iconic and artistically sophisticated institutions: the *streerole* or *bhratya*—the male actor who specialized exclusively in the impersonation of female characters.

This practice directly invokes Judith Butler's groundbreaking theories of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler argues that gender is not a stable, biological essence that precedes action; rather, it is "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1990, 140). Gender is a continuous social performance, sustained through bodily gestures, vocal intonations, clothing, and movements that are culturally coded as masculine or feminine. Butler famously points to

the practice of drag not as an imitation of a true, original gender, but as a performance that exposes the fact that the supposedly “original” gender is itself an imitation without a copy. Drag reveals the imitation that constitutes gender itself.

In the context of the traditional Jatra, the *streerole* was not merely a functional stand-in for a missing female body; they were the very pinnacle of aesthetic desire and emotional depth on the stage. Actors like Chapal Bhaduri—affectionately known to millions as “Chapal Rani” (Queen Chapal)—achieved unparalleled stardom in the mid-to-late twentieth century by embodying the feminine with an intensity, grace, and vocal mastery that left audiences spellbound. As Niladri R. Chatterjee observes in his meticulous study of Chapal Bhaduri’s “hyperformative female impersonation,” Bhaduri’s performance did not simply aim for a passive illusion of womanhood; instead, it deployed a hyper-codified, ultra-stylized femininity that was far more potent and recognizable to the audience than the behavior of ordinary, real-world women (Chatterjee 2009).

Bhaduri’s body on stage became a radical site of gender subversion. He wore elaborate wigs, false bosoms, and heavy silks, and trained his vocal cords to access a soaring falsetto that could carry across vast, chaotic crowds. Yet, the audience was fully aware that the shimmering goddess or the weeping, tragic heroine before them was biologically a man. This dual consciousness—the simultaneous awareness of the male body and the hyper-real feminine manifestation—is the essence of Butlerian performativity. It completely shatters the illusion of gender as a natural, biological inevitability.

When Chapal Rani performed the role of the goddess Shitala or the tragic heroine Mahiya, the performance did not merely depict a woman; it threw into sharp relief the entire apparatus of how womanhood is constructed through costume, posture, and voice. As Butler notes, “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of the body” (Butler 1993, 2).

The *streerole* successfully hijacked these regulatory norms, proving that the vocabulary of femininity could be mastered, inhabited, and beautifully weaponized by a male body.

As Jatra entered the late twentieth century, commercial pressures and changing social mores led to the mass induction of biological women into the troupes, largely displacing the traditional *streerole*. However, the *aesthetic legacy* of the *streerole* did not vanish; instead, it was absorbed by the incoming actresses. The women who entered the modern commercial Jatra stage did not bring with them the low-key, conversational realism of modern television or film. Instead, they had to step into the massive, hyper-stylized performance shoes left behind by generations of male female-impersonators. They had to learn to play a “woman” through the same larger-than-life, high-pitched, and grandly gestural parameters established by the *streerole*.

Consequently, modern Jatra actresses perform a form of femininity that is itself a second-order imitation—a biological woman imitating a male actor who was imitating an idealized aesthetic of womanhood. This layering of performance perfectly illustrates Butler’s assertion that gender is an ongoing, slippery drag show. The contemporary Jatra heroine, with her neon-bright makeup, explosive vocal outbursts, and stylized theatrical movements, continues to queer the stage by presenting gender not as an intimate, interior essence, but as a spectacular, highly externalized, and completely malleable artifice.

INTERSECTIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHIES: BHATTACHARYA, DEV SEN, AND THE MARGINALIZED BODY

To fully trace the political stakes of this aesthetic, we must anchor our reading in the distinct material and literary histories of Bengal, particularly through the theoretical insights of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. In her foundational work *Public Women on the Stage: Theatre Histories in Bengal*, Rimli Bhattacharya meticulously unpacks the social, economic, and moral precarity that defined the lives of the first generation of actresses who entered the public

theatres of Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bhattacharya 2003). Drawn primarily from the marginalized red-light districts (*bonedi parás*) of Calcutta, these women were viewed by the dominant, patriarchal *bhadralok* (bourgeois gentleman) society as moral castaways—prostitutes whose bodies were public property. Yet, once they stepped onto the stage, they were tasked with embodying the highest ideals of bourgeois virtue, domestic purity, and mythological divinity.

Bhattacharya highlights a deep-seated institutional anxiety within Bengali cultural history regarding the visible, vocal female body in public spaces. The proscenium theatre of the urban elite sought to discipline these women, forcing them into a respectable, sanitized mold that mirrored the domestic ideals of the colonial middle class. Jatra, however, by virtue of its fluid, popular, and deeply rural-urban itinerant networks, offered a fundamentally different space. When the marginalized female body entered the Jatra circuit, it was not domesticated by the clean boundaries of a proscenium arch or the quiet psychological interiority of bourgeois drama. Instead, it was thrown into a wild, carnivalesque atmosphere where the lines between the respectable and the transgressive were constantly blurred.

The modern commercial Jatra actress leverages this historical marginality through the medium of emotional and physical excess. Because she is performing for an audience that demands high-octane spectacle, she does not conform to the quiet, submissive, and deferential modes of behaviour expected of women within traditional patriarchal structures. On the Jatra stage, she is loud; she is physically commanding; she screams her defiance, her desire, and her grief across the *asor*. This performance style allows the actress to reclaim her body from the voyeuristic, disciplinary gaze of respectability. Her hyper-theatricality functions as a protective armour and a weapon of subversion; by blowing up her emotions to mythic, operatic proportions, she transforms her historically stigmatized body into an undeniable powerhouse of cultural production.

Complementing Bhattacharya's material history is the brilliant literary and folkloric analysis of Nabaneeta Dev Sen. In her seminal essay *Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana*, Dev Sen examines how women's folk songs, particularly the village songs of Chandrabati's sixteenth-century Ramayana, dismantle the grand, patriarchal, and heroic narratives of the classical epic (Dev Sen 1997). Dev Sen notes that when women retell these dominant narratives, they completely shift the focus from the heroic, public triumphs of male warriors to the intimate, interior, and often unacknowledged traumas, griefs, and quiet rebellions of the women—specifically focusing on Sita's pain, vulnerability, and resilience. They strip the epic of its cold, state-building moralism and replace it with a deeply emotional, visceral counter-narrative.

When we look at modern commercial Jatra through Dev Sen's lens, we see a similar vernacular strategy of subverting the canon. The modern *pala* may be ostensibly titled after a grand political figure, a historical revolution, or a traditional moral lesson—for instance, scripts dealing with the fall of Hitler, the heroic sacrifices of local freedom fighters, or the evils of corporate greed. Yet, the actual performance mechanics mirror the folk subversions identified by Dev Sen. The grand, ideological narratives of state politics, economic theory, or abstract morality are consistently dragged down into the fertile, messy earth of domestic melodrama and high-pitched emotional vulnerability.

The grand Marxist revolutionary or the powerful capitalist titan in a modern Jatra does not spend their time on stage debating abstract dialectical materialism or market economics. Instead, their ideological struggles are played out through explosive domestic confrontations, agonized soliloquies about parental betrayal, and hyper-dramatic declarations of love, honor, and loyalty. Modern Jatra effectively translates the dry, intellectual prose of the masculine, public canon into the highly charged, emotional poetry of popular folk expression. By filtering urgent political realities through an aesthetic of domestic

excess and visceral melodrama, Jatra “queers” the cold, rationalized, and patriarchal structures of modern political discourse, making it deeply accessible, affectively explosive, and thoroughly grounded in the marginalized consciousness of the subaltern masses.

THE STRUCTURAL ANARCHY OF MODERN COMMERCIAL JATRA: THE JOKER, THE CHORUS, AND THE PALAPROTAGONIST

The queer subversion embedded within modern Jatra is not merely a product of individual performances; it is woven into the very structural architecture of the genre. Even as modern commercial Jatra shifted its themes to mirror the secular and sensational crises of the late twentieth century, it stubbornly retained ancient structural tropes that purposefully fragment the narrative, preventing the consolidation of a singular, realist, or heteronormative authority. The most prominent of these structural disruptions are the figures of the *joker* (the clown/fool) and the *chhiti-gayan* (the detached chorus).

Historically, the *joker* in Jatra has held a radical license to transgress all boundaries. Operating both inside and outside the primary plot, the *joker* is a shape-shifting, carnivalesque entity. In modern commercial Jatra, while the primary protagonists might be locked in a serious, high-stakes political or domestic drama, the *joker* frequently bursts onto the *asar* to deliver biting satire, slapstick comedy, and highly suggestive double entendres. The *joker*’s body is explicitly coded as non-normative and eccentric; they wear mismatched, absurd clothing, use distorted physical gestures, and speak in a rapid-fire vernacular that mocks the elevated, serious rhetoric of the main characters.

This structural fragmentation is profoundly queer. In a standard realist play, the audience is encouraged to maintain a singular emotional focus, losing themselves in the illusion of a linear, logical narrative. The Jatra *joker*, however, completely shatters this illusion (*Verfremdungseffekt* or the alienation effect, to borrow from Bertolt Brecht’s modern performance theory). By mocking the high-blown

seriousness of the patriarchal heroes and political leaders, the *joker* exposes the ridiculousness of their self-important authority. The *joker* functions as a living, breathing Camp critique of the main narrative, reminding the audience that the grave, rigid structures of state power, class status, and gender roles are ultimately games that can be pulled apart with a well-placed joke or an absurd dance.

Similarly, the *chhiti-gayan* or the musical chorus cuts through the narrative at moments of peak emotional tension. When a character faces an impossible moral dilemma or a tragic demise, the action is abruptly frozen, and the musical ensemble steps forward to sing a commentary that is often packed with philosophical, existential, or highly melodramatic metaphors. This structural device completely destabilizes the psychological realism of the characters. The characters do not belong to an isolated, private reality; they are part of a shared, public, and explicitly artificial performance ritual.

Furthermore, this structural fragmentation creates a safe harbour for the depiction of non-normative desire and relationality. Madhurananda Gupta, in his semiological reading of the evolution of *Krishna Jatra*, notes that the structural flexibility of the folk stage has always allowed for a fluid, highly ambiguous interpretation of signs (Gupta 2022). In the traditional religious *pala*, the relationship between Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis transcended the rigid, legalistic definitions of worldly marriage and heteronormative propriety; it was a space of ecstatic, transgressive, and boundary-less love (*parakiya prem*).

When modern commercial Jatra secularized these plots, this semiotic fluidity was transferred onto contemporary relationships. Because the performance space is inherently artificial, characters can express intensities of platonic solidarity, male-to-male emotional devotion, and female-to-female alliances that would be heavily policed or deemed pathological within the strict confines of realist bourgeois art. The modern Jatra protagonist—whether a fiercely independent

woman fighting corrupt politicians or a male hero weeping openly in the arms of his comrade—is allowed an extraordinary range of emotional and physical expression. The genre’s structural refusal to adopt the clean, ordered, and disciplined narrative arcs of Western realism turns the modern Jatra pavilion into a site where alternative ways of feeling, desiring, and being can be flamboyantly performed and celebrated.

SECULAR SENSATIONALISM: THE POLITICAL SUBVERSION OF THE BOURGEOIS CANON

The political implications of Jatra’s Camp aesthetic become explicitly clear when we look at the content of late-twentieth-century and contemporary commercial *palas*. During this period, Jatra companies based in Chitpur—the historic centre of the Jatra industry in North Calcutta—began producing scripts with sensational, international, and deeply political titles such as *Ebaar Nazrul Ke Rokhe Ke* (Who Can Stop Nazrul Now?), *Hitlerer Patan* (The Fall of Hitler), *Vietnamer Juddho* (The Vietnam War), and *Marxbader Prothom Shurjyo* (The First Sun of Marxism). To the casual observer, these plays appeared to be highly didactic, ideological propaganda pieces designed to align with the dominant leftist political consciousness of post-independence West Bengal.

However, a closer look at the actual staging of these secular, political *palas* reveals an entirely different dynamic. When abstract political ideologies like Marxism, anti-imperialism, or historical fascism are filtered through the Jatra aesthetic, they undergo a radical transformation. They are completely stripped of their dry, intellectual academic armour and are re-clothed in the dazzling, flamboyant garb of pure melodrama and Camp theatricality.

It is worth noting how a figure like Adolf Hitler or Karl Marx is portrayed on the modern Jatra stage. He is transformed into a spectacular archetype. A Jatra actor playing Hitler does not deliver a historically accurate, psychologically realistic speech; instead, he

storms onto the *asor* in an over-designed, glittering military uniform, eyes lined with thick black kohl, delivering thunderous, rhythmically syncopated monologues that are punctuated by dramatic strikes of the kettle drum. The political struggle is no longer just an intellectual battle of ideas; it becomes a visceral, physical, and sonic spectacle.

This hybridity—the intersection of serious, radical political themes with a flamboyant, deeply artificial performance grammar—represents a profound subversion of the mainstream, elite cultural canon. The urban *bhadralok* elite has historically dismissed Jatra as *mota dager golpo* (coarse or vulgar storytelling), criticizing it for its lack of subtlety, its loud volumes, and its refusal to adhere to the high-minded principles of dramatic realism. This elite critique is deeply rooted in a class-based and postcolonial desire to present a sanitized, highly disciplined, and “respectable” image of Indian culture to the world—an image modelled on the serious, literary traditions of Western realist theatre.

By stubbornly refusing this middle-class discipline, modern commercial Jatra mounts a powerful counter-cultural resistance. It asserts that the working class, the peasantry, and the rural-urban masses do not need to adopt the quiet, repressed, and polite aesthetic codes of the bourgeoisie to engage with complex political realities. Jatra takes the grand historical narratives of the global elite and translates them into a popular vernacular language of pure, unadulterated emotion and visual extravagance. This is Camp at its most politically radical. It weaponizes vulgarity and excess to democratize the performance space, proving that the most profound political questions of human rights, class exploitation, and freedom can be fought out on an open-air earthen stage, enveloped in clouds of synthetic smoke, under the flashing glare of multi-coloured strobe lights.

THE RADICAL PRESERVATION OF THE UNNATURAL

“Queering the Canon: A Study of the Jatra Tradition in Bengal” reveals that the traditional and modern folk stage of Bengal has

never been a passive repository of conservative, unchanging values. Instead, it has continuously operated as a dynamic, deeply adaptive, and structurally transgressive performance ecosystem. By tracking its evolution from the sacred, ecstatic spaces of medieval Vaishnavism through the gender-bending brilliance of the traditional *streerole* exemplified by Chapal Bhaduri, and into the hyper-commercialized, secular, and sensational arenas of contemporary Bengal, this paper has demonstrated how Jatra systematically undermines the foundations of aesthetic and social normativity.

Through the theoretical frameworks of Susan Sontag and Judith Butler, we can recognize that Jatra's defining features—its operatic vocal delivery, its grandly exaggerated physical gestures, its flamboyant and anachronistic costumes, and its total embrace of emotional excess—are not primitive artistic shortcomings. Rather, they constitute a sophisticated, deeply intentional folk-vernacular Camp aesthetic. This aesthetic celebrates artifice over nature, style over moralism, and performance over essence. By rendering gender, politics, and domesticity through a lens of absolute, unmediated theatricality, Jatra continuously exposes the real-world structures of patriarchy, class hierarchy, and bourgeois respectability as fragile, performative constructs.

Furthermore, by integrating the critical historiographies of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen, this study highlights how the historically marginalized bodies of the actress, the female impersonator, and the folk storyteller find a unique liberation within this structural anarchy. Stripped of the disciplinary boundaries of urban proscenium realism, these performers use the raw exposure of the *asor* to scream, weep, and perform their defiance with an authority that completely eclipses any conservative constraints written into the literal scripts.

Modern commercial Jatra stands as a monumental monument to the radical preservation of the unnatural. In a contemporary global

cultural landscape that increasingly prizes the sanitized, predictable, and quiet aesthetics of digital media and middle-class realism, the Jatra stage remains beautifully, unapologetically loud, messy, and extravagant. It is a genre that is naturally queer, a brilliant space where the margins take centre stage, where style reigns supreme, and where the sound and fury of human performance continue to shatter the canons of respectability.

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Ritwik Ghatak's *Jwalanta* (Ablaze):
A Post-Partition Drama of Violence,
Lawlessness and Identity Crisis.

Tilok Naskar

ABSTRACT:

Ritwik Ghatak is best known as an individual committed to the art of cinema, as a film-maker, director and scriptwriter of extraordinary talent and rare genius. Much less known however is his contribution to the world of theatre, as an actor, playwright and dramaturge. What is distinctive about Ghatak's plays is then emphasis on social issues. The two historical events which affected him most deeply and contributed most significantly to his worldview was the partition of India and the forced displacement of millions of Bengalis from their homes in the erstwhile East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh. Displacement and the trauma of upheaval and alienation were feelings and concerns which he confronted squarely. And coupled with this was his disillusionment with post-Independence governments which he saw as having failed to provide for the most basic needs of people. As a socially committed thinker and as an acute observer of society, Ghatak depicted in his plays the lives and the actions of common people, most often middle-class educated Bengalis who had been affected by sociopolitical forces beyond their control. An attempt will be made here at an examination of one of Ghatak's later dramatic compositions, the play called *Jwalanta* (*Ablaze* in English translation) which was first performed in the famous Academy of Fine Arts hall in Kolkata on 24th August 1975. It is well to remember that *Jwalanta* is a

call to action, for while Ghatak wrote this play in the 1970s, the issues it raises remain relevant even today as the rape and murder of women are everyday occurrences in our nation.

Key words: Ritwik Ghatak, cinema, theatre, alienation, displacement, lawlessness, *Jwalanta*, post-Independence India.

Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976) is best known as an individual committed to the art of cinema, as a film-maker, director and scriptwriter of extraordinary talent and rare genius. Much less known however is his contribution to the world of theatre, as an actor, playwright and dramaturge. Ghatak himself is on record as having said that his first love had always been the stage (Biswas, 198), and it is reported that he started out in theatre while still in his teens as an actor in such plays as Dwijendralal Ray's *Chandragupta* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Achalayatan*. A few years later, he wrote his first play named *Kalo Sayar* (*Black Lake*) in 1947 when he was about twenty years old. Even if the script of the play is no longer extant, there still exist several other examples of his essays in playwriting including the five of his plays which have been translated into English. These are *Charter* (originally *Dalil*), *Communication* (originally *Sanko*), *Agony* (originally *Jwala*), *That Woman* (originally *Shei Meye*), and *Ablaze* (originally *Jwalanta*). What is distinctive about Ghatak's plays is then emphasis on social issues. The two historical events which affected him most deeply and contributed most significantly to his worldview was the partition of India and the forced displacement of millions of Bengalis from their homes in the erstwhile East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh. Displacement and the trauma of upheaval and alienation were feelings and concerns which he confronted squarely. And coupled with this was his disillusionment with post-Independence governments which he saw as having failed to provide for the most basic needs of people. As a socially committed thinker and as an acute observer of society, Ghatak depicted in his plays the lives and the actions of common

people, most often middle-class educated Bengalis who had been affected by sociopolitical forces beyond their control. An attempt will be made here at an examination of one of Ghatak's later dramatic compositions, the play called *Jwalanta* (*Ablaze* in English translation) which was first performed in the famous Academy of Fine Arts hall in Kolkata on 24th August 1975.

Ghatak's inspiration for writing this play came from an incident that had taken place around the early 1970s in the district town of Krishnanagar in the state of West Bengal. A young woman, the daughter of a learned Sanskrit pundit, had been brutally raped and burnt to death by a group of antisocials. Four years had passed since Ghatak had written his previous play *That Girl* (*Sei Meye*), and from around 1973 onwards he had been feeling the urge to compose a new play. (*Natyakatha*, 262) The opportunity to stage *Jwalanta* however came only in 1975. At this time, the theatre producer Ranjitmal Kankaria, owner of the Star Theatre in Kolkata had an ongoing play entitled *Parichay* being staged in his theatre hall. Ghatak had been invited by Kankaria to watch a performance of this one day, to see the acting of Satindra Chattopadhyay, a member of the cast who was close to Ghatak. (Parthasarathi Chattopadhyay, 201) In an article titled "Jwalanta Nataka Abhinoy", which was originally published in the theatre journal *Natyakatha*, Parthasarathy Chattopadhyay reminisced that Ghatak had watched the performance of the play but had not liked it. Subsequently, he asked Kankaria if he would allow him (Ghatak) to stage a play written by him.

This play, *Jwalanta*, had been composed by Ghatak over a two-years period from 1973-74. Upon receiving Kankaria's consent, rehearsals were started for *Jwalanta* in Kankaria's house. It was initially planned that the first show would be held on 1st May, 1975. But this date could not be maintained as Ghatak had to go to Mumbai (Bombay) around this time. When Ghatak came back towards the end of the month, it was decided that *Jwalanta* would be staged on the 29th of June. Unfortunately, a few days prior to the mounting of the play, Indira

Gandhi the then Prime Minister of India declared the imposition of Emergency rule all over the country on 25th June 1975. Ghatak was told by the then Minister of Housing Affairs, Government of West Bengal, not to stage the play on the planned date over fears that its performance could create tensions in the society. Ultimately, *Jwalanta* was performed on stage in the Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata, but only on 24th August 1975.

Jwalanta depicts a corrupted and shattered society and paints a compelling picture of degenerating values after the partition of Bengal. The play is centered around the story of a Brahmin family consisting of a learned Sanskrit scholar named Taracharan, his wife Sachimata and his daughter Bishnupriya, all of whom had been forced to leave their own land in the newly formed nation of Bangladesh and to find refuge in their broken-down ancestral village home due to the lawlessness and the insecurity of women folk in the new country. The play has four scenes. The stage setting and atmosphere of the first scene sets the tone of the play. When curtain rises against a black cyclorama, lights come on and a poster descends from above on which it is written: “The task of this drama is to break drama.” This inscription clearly indicates that *Jwalanta* was not to be thought of or experienced as a conventional play. Ghatak inserted at this point a song sung in a female voice in the background: “Sachimatago ami charjuge ei janam dukhini” (O mother Sachi, I am that Unfortunate who was born in all four eras), a traditional Bengali popular devotional folk song, memorializing the pain of the legendary saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu upon parting from his mother. Taking a cue from this song, in the play itself, the idea of separation figures as a leit-motif from the very beginning till the end, as it is shown first that Taracharan and his family had been compelled to leave their homeland, then second that Bishnupriya was abducted from her family, and finally that she was forcibly taken away from this beautiful world when the antisocials ultimately kill her by burning her alive.

The play opens with Taracharan, Sachi and Bishnupriya entering the stage, and looking around hopelessly with broken hearts and despondent eyes. They have returned to their ancestral property where a small dwelling is seen to be standing. Taracharan becomes excited and feels a deep emotional connect with his own land. However, he immediately comes back to reality and expresses a feeling of disgust at the shattered condition of Bengal. He says: "This Bengal is finished. I saw in Jalpaiguri in North Bengal too that people are destroying themselves. I should start the *tole*, the school, again in my ancestral place – I should stick to the *tole* – I have to find a meaning in life, at least!" (*Natyakatha*, 263, trans. by author) His wife Sachi however refuses to share in his optimism and expresses doubts about whether they can even regain a meaningful life. Their young daughter Bishnupriya however is incapable of appreciating the sentiments of her parents. She instead dances with joy in response to the beauty of the world and the sky around her. Her youthful innocence makes her think that human beings are lovely, and that she does not want anything else. She is incapable of realizing that her innocence will soon be ravaged. As a counter to the naïve opinion of the girl, we are offered a different perspective by Sushovan, a visiting journalist who is a friend of Taracharan. Sushovan comments about the rampant social degeneration that has overtaken the country:

Sushovan: Wagon breaking is taking place around us, and goods are being smuggled from Bangladesh. The newspaper's sent me here to write a report about all this. But tell me, why did you have to return?

Taracharan: In the new Bangladesh there's only rampant smuggling, lawlessness, mugging and the big problem of safeguarding the safety and dignity of women. They have no respect for women. My daughter Bishnupriya - but why my daughter only? All women face the same problem. (*Natyakatha*, 264, trans. by author)

In Ghatak's dramatic envisioning, Bishnupriya is not only the daughter of Taracharan but also a symbol of all suffering women,

and in a broader sense, a symbol of the motherland itself. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio in his poem “To India - My Native Land” had celebrated the past glory of our motherland, writing that it had been “worshipped as a deity” in the past, and that it had held her head high like an eagle before losing her freedom and being “chained down at last.” (35) But while Derozio had written about India’s past, Ghatak in his play shows how in Post-Independence times too the motherland was being devastated. Even as an impression of peace and tranquility is represented in the play through the actions and dialogues by Bishnupriya, this evocation of a peaceful and happy atmosphere is shattered by the sudden arrival of three anti-socials named Raja, Rana and Feku Mian. These three men pursue Bishnupriya even as she is singing alone on the stage. They start by insulting her with vulgar sexist comments like “Bendaboner Lila”, “Khasa Mal”, and similar filthy remarks. Next, the trio is joined by Raicharan, the local corrupt Police Inspector who takes money from them illegally in exchange of giving them protection and information. Raicharan’s dialogues reveal the extent of his corruption as a colluder with these criminal elements:

Raicharan: I have come. Raicharan, Raicharan Khanra, the Police Inspector in this place, your friend, philosopher and guide. Raja, Rana and Feku Mian – today at night 2 pm, the rail wagon will arrive from North Bengal. If you break open the wagon, you can unload fifty thousands worth of goods. How much will you give me? (*Natyakatha*, 265, trans. by author)

If the above dialogue indicates rampant societal lawlessness and a complete void in morality, another picture is evoked towards the end of the first scene of the play in which three learned men, Durgacharan Nayratna, Raghudeb Sarbobhauma and Utpal Vidyabhusan, are shown to be engaged in a deep but completely irrelevant conversation about political events taking place in foreign countries. These three educated individuals also converse about various issues and perspectives in Indian Philosophy, all the while being completely unregarding and even apathetic about everything going on in their own society and

locality. For instance, they animatedly talk about Argentina, America, and South Africa, but completely ignore India, show concern about what Ian Smith was doing in Rhodesia, but are oblivious of the realities around them. Their turning of a blind eye to the prevalent lawlessness all around them does not however save them, as it is shown in the second scene that the antisocials Raja, Rana, and Feku Mian target Raghudeb's daughter with vulgarities even as the policeman Raicharan refuses to intervene. Indeed, when Raghudeb appeals for help to Raicharan, saying: "You are the law. This torture and injustice is happening in front of you", the Inspector reprimands him sharply and retorts: "You are doing wrong Raghudeb Sarbobhauma. There is no law in this country. Law has been demolished long ago. Here is one law, and that is the law of the jungle. You will not get the essence of life here in reading Sanskrit, the *Gita*, the Veda and the Upanishadas. The law of this country is to dismantle everything by looting – this is the law which is now going on here." (*Natyakatha*, 270, trans. by author)

It is only then that Raghudeb who had earlier been indifferent to the moral degeneration present all around him, begins to realize that he too cannot escape the contemporary social ugliness and has been in fact trapped in a web of lawlessness in which his own daughter has been molested and made to give up self-respect.

Scene three of the play begins with a *Bharatnatyam* dance performance at which all the major characters are shown to be present. Then, after the programme gives over, Raja, Rana and Feku Mia again attack Bishnupriya who complains to the police inspector Raicharan about their misbehavior and requests him to accompany her home for her safety. To her frantic pleas, Raicharan however reacts with an entirely evasive response: "No one has come in this world with anyone, no one will go with someone. I came alone and will go alone. God will think about my last days," he says before leaving. (*Natyakatha*, 274, trans. by author) When Taracharan enters and asks his daughter the reason behind her melancholic appearance, Bishnupriya cries out: "Father, we should go somewhere else." (*Natyakatha*, 275, trans. by

author) Upon hearing these words from his daughter, Taracharan becomes frightened. Yet through all these, Bishnupriya remains optimistic and hopeful that the present condition of societal decay and degeneration would come to an end one day, and that what was needed was for everyone to work together for a transformation. Her words however fail to inspire her father and mother, both of whom remain much less optimistic, even as they resign themselves to staying back in their own place as they can manage to get two handfuls of food here at least. Through such dialogues, Ghatak clearly highlights the reality that personal safety and dignity were not the only challenges facing ordinary people, but also the spectres of poverty and unemployment. This is also brought out in a subsequent dialogue shared between the father, daughter and mother:

Bishnupriya: See father, I think this world will become beautiful one day. That may be two hundred, or five hundred or one thousand hundred years later – but it shall be. Father, I have learnt this from my own life. We have to work hard for that day. Father, let's go.

Taracharan: My dear child, you don't know that I also believe in what you are thinking. But where shall we go? We have no place to go. We have at least been able to get two handful of food here. What will we do in a distant land? But why are you saying these words?

Bishnupriya: Please stop, you will not understand. Its ok.

Taracharan: What?

Bishnupriya: Everything is all right. Let's go.

(Sachimata enters from the left. She comes to a halt upon looking at her daughter's face. Then approaching Bishnupriya, Sachimata places her hand over Bishnupriya's head.)

Taracharan: What has happened?

Sachi: I think something has happened. Please go away from here. You do not need to bother yourself in these matters. You have read the scriptures all your life. You don't understand anything else.

All you have in your nose is the smell of the dust of orthodoxy.
Don't talk to us.

Taracharan: What type of behaviour is this? All right, I am going.
(Taracharan leaves the stage from the left. Bishnupriya embraces her mother and breaks down in tears. The Mother looks up at the face of her daughter.)

Sachi: What will happen?

Bishnupriya: Mother, everything here is ...

Sachi: I know. But we have to live amidst all this.

Bishnupriya: We cannot live mother, we cannot live like this. This living is not real life.

(Curtain falls with Bishnupriya's cry. Before this, a board descends from above on which it is written: "Lives can be lived in many ways.")
(*Natyakatha*, 275-6, trans. by author)

The play reaches its climax in the last scene when the mother Sachimata enters in a state of panic, and grabbing hold of the Inspector cries out: "What you have done! What have you all done? You have taken away the honour and respect of mothers and women. Sushma has gone mad." (*Natyakatha*, 278, trans. by author) Sushma, the daughter of Raghudeb Sarbhauma had descended into insanity because of the physical and mental torture that had been inflicted on her by Raja, Rana and Feku Mian. Then, as Bishnupriya enters the stage alone, she is set upon by the same three ruffians who threaten her to surrender herself to them or else they would kill her and her parents. Bishnupriya pleads with them think of her as their sister, but her words fall on deaf ears as they have lost all their good senses in the heat of their passion. In a desperate attempt to save herself, Bishnupriya appeals to them to allow her to dress up before surrendering her body. She goes into her house and tries to escape by the back door, but the hooligans chase her and gang rape her. Noises of her shrieks can be heard from the back of the stage, and these sounds gradually turn into sounds

of groaning. The Police Inspector Raicharan enters the stage at this point, but instead of arresting the criminals, he wonders why they had left their profession of breaking wagons and had turned to indulging in sexual violence against women. In a coldblooded response, Raja, one of the scoundrels tell the Inspector not to worry, and he then instructs another goon Rana to get a tin of kerosine from a nearby slum. As they wait for Rana to come back, they break into a macabre dance which they describe as a “green tarantula dance”. They force the policeman to join them in the dance which ends only when Rana comes back with the tin of kerosine. The bleeding and brutalized Bishnupriya is brought out by them and kerosine is splashed on her body before she is set alight.

At this point, the journalist Sushovan enters the stage even as the Inspector whips out his notebook and a pen, and crouching down before Bishnupriya asks her who she would name as her violator. Then as Sushovan tries to take dying Bishnupriya’s hand onto his lap, a cinema screen on the stage shows a close up of Bishnupriya’s face. From the screen the girl looks directly at the audience and spits at them. Then, as the body of the girl is lowered down a stage trapdoor, Sushovan advances upstage and directly addresses the audience. Finally, the stage turns dark with only Sushovan’s face being illuminated by a spotlight as he utters the concluding words in the play.

For how long, how long will the people of the country put up with this? It’s no longer tolerable. You who have come to watch this play, will go home, have your dinner, and go to bed. Tomorrow you go to your office and work as usual. And such oppression will continue to persist. Isn’t there any way out of this? Can’t we all join together to stop this oppression? Can’t we get infuriated? (*Natyakatha*, 281, trans. by author)

Then at this point, a banner is seen to descend from the flies above reading:

People have to become furious if they wish to live.

Brothers and sisters burst out in anger and change everything.

Otherwise, nothing will happen. (*Natyakatha*, 281, trans. by author)

Finally at the conclusion of the play is heard a chorus of many voices joining in a song calling upon million of brothers and sisters to join together and to fight. "Does anyone fear to die," runs the couplet of this song in Hindi, "Since we will all die of hunger anyway!" (*Natyakatha*, 281, trans. by author)

Through his play *Jwalanta*, Ritwik Ghatak portrayed a grim picture of a society in which women were devoid of dignity, safety and liberty. The actor Anandarup Biswas who played the role of Raja in the first production of the play recalled Ritwik Ghatak telling him that "Anti-socials are not born in mother's womb. Some people create them for their own interest. Women are presented in modern society as commodities. By casting Bishnupriya into the fire, they are destroying Indian culture and society." Ghatak is also on record as having said that "Anti-socials not only come from slums but also from the elite who wear ties, coats and hats. We can see the deeds of ruffians, but we do not notice the devilry of people who are like gentlemen. It is those who create war, divide countries and kill people with nuclear weapons, loot lands and rape countless Bishnupriyas." (Author's translation, *Natyakatha*, 198) True to his progressive idealism and fierce iconoclastic personality, Ritwik Ghatak in this play expressed his concern, anger and disgust at the way in which Indian village societies in particular had become corrupted in post-Partition India. His anger in *Jwalanta* is directed against not only evil men overtaken by greed and lust, but also aroused by at the apathy of men who refused to be concerned and preferred to ignore and to remain ignorant of the corruption that surrounded them. His fury above all is directed against the people in power and particularly the representatives of the state establishment like the Police Inspector Raicharan who should have served as purveyors of justice but had been corrupted to the most degenerated level possible. It is well to remember that *Jwalanta* is a call to action, for while Ghatak wrote this play in the 1970s, the issues it

raises remain relevant even today as the rape and murder of women are everyday occurrences in our nation. Hence even as Sushma and Bishnupriya represent the pathetic vulnerability of Indian women, the play as a whole is an unyielding depiction of the corruption, lawlessness, ignorance and apathy that characterizes the lives of our countrymen even today.

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The Return of Morality Plays in England: Unexpected Inspirations in Conan Doyle

Shinjini Ghoshal

ABSTRACT

The revival of medievalism originated in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Morality plays like *Everyman* received its first recorded modern performance in July 1901 by William Poel. One of the unexpected authors of Modern morality plays was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who turned from his own disappointment (he was upset because of the raging popularity of his own crime fiction) to transport medieval ideas and forms to the twentieth century. My paper focuses mainly on the stage works by Doyle, specifically two out of his fifteen, *The Fires of Fate* (1909) and *The Journey* (1922), where he talks about the (late) Victorian/ early modern crisis of faith and how pain, grief and suffering serve a useful purpose in the larger design of the universe. The Victorian conflict between faith and reason travelled through ages (from last years of Queen Victoria's reign to the Edwardian era and finally to the early modern period) and settled as strong moral and allegorical elements in Doyle's plays, similar to medieval moralities. The dissonance between logic, spirituality and empirical progress is addressed through the allegorical characters of Inspiration, Sorrow, Faith, Reason, and Science. The decadent moralities and crumbling beliefs of the late Victorian and early modern era are inscribed within the conversations between The Man and The Woman which sway between despair and hope. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection (1859) challenged

the existing religious belief in God as an Absolute. It provoked a wave of pessimism and skepticism challenging the historicity of the Bible. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate how Conan Doyle has used an antiquated form of allegorical drama to portray his own concerns about morality, or rather, the apparent lack of it in his age and times. The paper deals with how the concept of morality plays has been revisited during the Edwardian era and how writers have tried to revive the existing 'Moralities' as well as problematise the concept by showcasing the conflicting emotions of a late-Victorian mind triggered by Darwin's doctrine: the blooming faith in Britain's industrialisation and scientific progress and the crawling sense of doubt in authorities and absolutes that ultimately lead to a crisis of belief in the modern age.

Keywords: Medievalism, Morality plays, Revival, Late-Victorian crisis, Allegories, Conflict.

Afterward I remembered these things very clearly, with that longing we feel sometimes to recover a state of life that we have lost forever, though perhaps that we have lost it is all its value. (Unsworth, *Morality Play* 97)

The morality play, associated with the Middle Ages in England has always been regarded as a genre related to medieval drama that introduced allegorical themes of virtues and vices to teach its audience about the proper conducts of Christian life and how to attain salvation. It flourished in England in the fifteenth and sixteenth century and then gradually faded into obscurity mainly because of its deep roots in Catholic theology. This kind of drama depicting rigid personifications of religious faith and beliefs was gradually rejected as the country experienced a major religious shift to Protestantism. It subsequently faced political suppression as well: in 1558 Queen Elizabeth I officially banned religious drama to censor religious propaganda-driven plays being staged.¹ The genre gradually absorbed into Elizabethan drama

1 It was a method of state intervention against growing civil unrest in England.

as the psychological conflict of morality plays blended into secular stories following a nuanced structure and organic growth of complex human characters like Doctor Faustus and Macbeth.

Like other forms of medieval English drama such as the miracle and mystery plays, moralities became obsolete as its characteristics were entirely unsuitable for the contemporary viewers. In *Mediaeval Drama*, Alexander Manson Kinghorn wrote how morality plays “no longer answered the questions which were being asked by educated people.” (Kinghorn 125) The simple characters, lacking in psychological depth discouraged viewers who were looking for character-growth instead of allegorical personas featuring as wooden abstractions who never evolved throughout the play. The predictability of the plot and unappealing didacticism made it less of a play and more of “a sermon cast in dramatic form.” (Kinghorn 112) The Protestant Reformers saw the Middle Ages as the dark period of ignorance which was dominated by papist dictatorship that needed reformation. Voltaire in his *Essay on the Customs and Spirit of Nations* (1756) fiercely critiques the Middle Ages as an “era of anarchy, disorientation and foolishness supported by the Catholic Church.” (Bartlett 12) However, numerous eighteenth-century writers, including Voltaire, were inspired by the medieval times and revived the ethos of the era in their plays and novels. David Matthews notices how the final decades of the eighteenth century “saw a Europe-wide turn to the primitive in all its forms.” (Matthews 6) This resulted from the general longing for the lost simplicity² and made artists like the Pre-Raphaelites or writers like Sir Walter Scott or Victor Hugo fascinated in reworking medieval themes and forms.

Queen Victoria's death in 1901 escalated the national doubt regarding the future of Britain as an international superpower. The agitation was mainly regarding the country's military and economic conditions which were viewed as outdated, backward and insufficient

2 To understand the nature of Romanticism or the spirit of Gothic Revival, one needs to have “knowledge of the rediscovery of the Middle Ages that began in the 1760s.” (Matthews 7)

when compared to dynamically developing younger nations like Germany. The extensive amount of public concerns in Edwardian England covered a large number of areas: the trade union movement, labour unrest, class consciousness and the education of women to name a few. Richard Hyman observed how Britain as a country had always displayed an exceptional degree of class struggle, which by the beginning of the twentieth century inspired socialist propaganda among numerous union leaders and followers, and which at the time of the Great War made many unions express “an explicit commitment in their rules to the socialist transformation of economy and society.” (Hyman 68) To understand the reasons behind the return to medieval theatrical forms in English drama one must understand how these areas of considerations enhanced the Morality Play Revival in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The first years of the post-Victorian era were marked by a rising class conflict, as concepts like New Liberalism and Trade Unionism escalated, and socialist thoughts made the working class restless.³ Since one of the ideological goals of socialism was social and economic equality, the Morality Play Revival perfectly inscribed itself into its theoretical framework. In medieval plays, this concept was realised through the motif of “danse macabre”, which represented death as the final equaliser. In Modern Moralities, where the threat of death was usually eliminated, this concept was realised through the suggestion that everybody had the same chance at happiness as long as they made appropriate ethical choices. Modern Moralities related to the idea of equality not only in their content, but also through the fact that this new century welcomed them as plays addressed to all

3 The Labour Movement culminated in the success in the general election in 1906, after which the Labour Representation Committee was re-named as the “Labour Party” and had twenty-nine MPs.

4 The term is French for “Dance of Death” and is a late medieval artistic and literary allegory where Death is personified. It acts as a reminder to humanity of the fragile, temporary nature of earthly existence.

of the society, and not any particular group.⁵ This can be concluded from the fact that these 'modern' plays were written by authors from different literary and amateur circles. Next to historical revivals like William Poel's *Everyman* in 1901, and serious plays written by well-established poets like W.B. Yeats (*The Hour Glass*), one may find numerous moralities written by amateur writers as well.⁶

In some ways Modern Moralities were an attempt to challenge the class-consciousness of the British society as they were plays meant for everyone. William Poel's production of *Everyman* in July 1901 reminded other British and American dramatists about the existence of moralities. Although the general feeling among the English people at the beginning of the new century was "unease at the way the world was going" (Read 20), Edwardian era, created by the horror of the Great War and its aftereffects, was gloomy as well as nostalgic reminiscing of a lost age with "quiet country life, peaceful downland, gentle horses, affectionate families, and deferential servants, all bathed in golden memory." (Read 27-28) Modern Moralities explored the complexities of daily life in a rapidly changing socio-political scenario and guaranteed an optimistic ending. This blend of seriousness and positivity made them a convenient theatrical choice for the Edwardian audience. The morality play, like the Edwardian society, also became largely secular. Secularised moralities often addressed current topics of social controversies: instead of teaching people how to die well (like their medieval prototypes), the characters of Modern Moralities tried

5 Marion Jones explained in *Early Moral plays and the Earliest Secular Drama* that the didactic messages in these medieval plays are "used by people who know all the answers, to enlighten those who might otherwise neglect to ask all the questions." (Jones 247)

6 To cite some examples of plays by amateurs, *Work and Wealth* (as presented by students at the 'Southern Summer School' for 'Women Workers') and W.F. Almond's *Everychild* (performed in churches on specific occasions) can be mentioned as noteworthy.

to instruct how to live ethically (their ‘preachings’ were secular and acceptable to the middle-class audience).⁷

When William Poel requested to stage his resurrected play in a church, it was declined by both Westminster Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral. In the end he settled for the Master’s Court of the Charterhouse which was built as a monastery in the fourteenth century. It was there, in the central courtyard, that the first modern revival of *Everyman* was presented on July 13, 1901. (Kuehler 5) The success of the play was gradual, huge and unexpected; a play which originally was staged because Poel “wanted to do a morality play to show the beginning of drama” (Kuehler 5), it faced initial commercial failure. However, later interventions of the American Press managed to secure audience and by default, money.⁸ The success of *Everyman* restored faith in the ‘saleability’ of revived morality plays and inspired writers to produce more such plays for early twentieth century British theatre.

One of the authors of Modern Morality Plays who was unexpectedly inspired by the emerging trend was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who was widely known for his immortal creation of the sleuth-character Sherlock Holmes, and certainly not known at all (to his own disappointment) for his fifteen stage works. The thematic elements of

7 Secular Moralities were performed to depict the challenges that were faced by ‘every-man’ in everyday life. For example the life of a young clerk (in *Insomnia*), a workaholic (in *Life’s Measure*), an atheist teacher (in *The Hour-Glass*), or a child (in *Everychild*) – all of them portrayed life from the perspective of a specific common man.

8 The play also set off on a tour to other cities and was thus performed in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Indianapolis, Hartford, Pittsburgh, Toledo and St Louis. As time went by, more and more changes were introduced and many of the play’s didactic elements were cut out. The production returned to America in 1904 and 1907, and it was revived numerous times in London. It is also worth mentioning that *Everyman* made it as far as Hollywood, where it was presented as a charity event at the Hollywood Bowl and directed by Johannes Paulsen, a famous Danish actor and director who came from Copenhagen to work on the piece. Charlie Chaplin himself allowed the use of his studios for rehearsals of this play.

morality and redemption have, however, always been an integral part of his broader bibliography. In the Sherlock Holmes canon we find in short-stories like *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* or *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange* how the rational detective-figure had his own kind of 'higher morality' as he offered 'justice' to the society by sometimes letting go of the criminals if the cause behind their crimes was just and driven by genuine passion. In his later works like *The Land of Mist*, Doyle used the setting of science-fiction to explore themes of human actions and how they are connected to morality through the character of a skeptical scientist, Professor Challenger who investigated the world of Spiritualism (a concept which was one of Doyle's own personal obsessions).

Doyle's most direct connection to morality being depicted on stage is his 1909 stage production, *The Fires of Fate* which was a dramatised version of his novella, *The Tragedy of Korosko*. The subtitle of the dramatic piece was "A Modern Morality Play" and one may find evidences in his historical letters how Doyle defended this specific subtitle against critics who felt the play was packed with action and that its adventurous tone was a complete antithesis to what was traditionally expected of a religious drama.

Well, the reason is that the whole action of the play is to illustrate a philosophic theory of life as laid down in the first act. I suppose many plays are morality plays. In a sense, the old British melodrama was one, for its essential point was that virtue should triumph and vice be defeated. But it seemed to me that there was room for something which dealt with modern problems and apply more to life as we know it. What is the philosophy? Well, it is as old as the hills, and yet needs to be restated and revendicated with every generation. It upholds that optimism which I believe to be supreme human wisdom, and that faith which will enable the man to be optimistic upon general principles, however much the particular instance may seem to be an exception to his scheme of philosophy. (Doyle, "A Modern Morality Play" 3)

The story of the novella as well as its dramatic form is of Colonel Egerton, who learns that he suffers from an incurable spinal disease which must result in paralysis and death within a year's time. The only known treatment which gives a slight chance of recovery is experiencing a considerable shock. In his hardship he is supported by two brothers: a famous physician, who tells him the diagnosis, and the clergyman who dissuades him from suicide. Instead of ending his life, Egerton sets off with the brothers on a journey to Egypt. There he falls in love and is cured from his condition by a blow to the head received during a fight with Dervish extremists in Egyptian Sudan. The play explores the philosophical themes of Divine Intentions, concepts of free will and redemption that comes after hardships. It rejects nihilism and defends how life's purposeful struggles are not random but a design by the Divine Providence to restore faith in endurance of pain: physical and emotional torments are vital, rejuvenating forces that make people better human beings after they have achieved salvation from sufferings.

The play premiered at the Lyric Theatre on June 15th, 1909 and in December 1909 at the Illinois Theatre in Chicago. It was filmed twice, in 1923 and 1932. In London the play ran for 125 performances. It definitely did not enjoy the level of popularity that the Modern Morality Play *Experience* achieved in the USA, but it attracted crowds, probably in part due to Conan Doyle's popularity as a crime fiction writer. In many ways it was not a proper Modern Morality Play either. Oscar Parker from *The English Illustrated Magazine* mocked Conan Doyle's application of the term to his own play: "It is a safe description, for it may serve to cover more than one dramatic sin." (Parker 422) Moreover, he called *The Fires of Fate* a psychological comedy converted into a thrilling drama and reproved its excessive luridness which apparently can only be justified by the fact that a Modern Morality Play "may be a law to itself ... [i]t is quite the scheme of a Modern Morality Play that the 'comic relief' should save the situation." (Parker 422) The review discarded the showiness of the

piece and its attempt at humour: “If Sir Conan Doyle had developed his story among less lurid lines he might have given us a masterpiece but he chose the more showy path ... and so we have *The Fires of Fate* as it stands; popular it is sure to be, but as a play, neither fish, flesh nor fowl, only a ‘Modern Morality Play’” (Parker 424). *The Fires of Fate* certainly lacked the features of a prototypical morality play, such as the employment of abstractions as characters. It was also too realistic, too action-packed and not allegorical enough to claim its place among Modern Moralities. However, Parker’s judgement was rather harsh: the play had a clear moral, a journey towards death/redemption motif and an indisputable didactic setting where Doyle talked about the late-Victorian crisis of faith and how pain, grief and suffering served a useful purpose in the larger design of the universe.

The Victorian conflict⁹ between faith and reason also served strong moral and allegorical elements in his 1922 play *The Journey* which was a lesser-known work but very much similar to medieval morality drama in temperament and structure. In 1859, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection had already challenged the existing religious belief in God as an Absolute. It provoked a wave of pessimism and skepticism challenging the historicity of the Bible and authority (authenticity) of the Church. We find these prevalent elements of decadent moralities and crumbling beliefs of the (late) Victorian and early modern era (post World War I) inscribed within the conversations between The Man and The Woman in Doyle’s play which sway between despair and hope. The dissonance between logic, spirituality and empirical progress was also addressed through

9 Doyle’s life’s journey is in itself a classic case of Victorian crisis of faith. Born Catholic, educated at Jesuit schools, he rejected strict religious dogmas in his youth. While studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh, he was deeply interested in the writings of Charles Darwin. He later embraced agnosticism and instead of blindly believing in any faith, sought scientific evidence and abandoned orthodox religion. However, after losing his own son and brother in World War I (1914-1918), he found solace in Spiritualism (which he viewed as an empirical science and not a religious doctrine).

the allegorical characters of Inspiration, Sorrow, Faith, Reason, and Science. Doyle's obscure dramatic piece is a one-act dramatic dialogue between a weary traveller and a mysterious stranger and their brief conversation reflected deep-rooted interests in morality and spiritualism. As an allegorical morality play, *The Journey* was structured like *Everyman* with personified archetypes instead of characters representing human existence, faith and ethics. The set-up of the play reflected Doyle's own philosophic theory of life as he transitioned into Spiritualism in his later years and used the theatre to guide humanity towards enlightenment and spiritual salvation.¹⁰

It would seem that Conan Doyle was too lenient in saying that "many plays are morality plays." (Doyle, "A Modern Morality Play" 3) Any play that explored some philosophy or had a moral cannot be categorised as a morality play. His interpretation however gave us an idea of what was understood by the term of 'morality play' in the beginning of the twentieth century and how significantly the original medieval meaning of this term was expanded. French philosopher Nicolas Caritat in his posthumously published work *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) stated about the Middle Age: "It was the general character of this epoch, that it . . . prepared the soil which the following ages were to cover with so rich and so abundant an harvest." (Caritat 144) In the later years, the scholarly fascination and general interest in medieval achievements and its twentieth-century revival had eventually created a new academic interdisciplinary field called 'Medievalism'.

The ghosts of the Middle Ages are unquiet. (Matthews 1)

The recycling of the spirit of the 'Dark Ages' is an ongoing process "our modern view of the Middle Ages is in itself the product of

10 The play was never given a standalone theatrical run and it was tucked away inside his wartime and historical verses published in a volume in 1922, titled *The Poems of Arthur Conan Doyle: Collected Edition*. It was largely overlooked by contemporary critics as during the time of its publication Doyle was more focused on his public lectures on Spiritualism and as a result the play was pushed aside as propaganda rather than mainstream drama.

many centuries of development and debate.” (Bartlett 9) Today, ‘Medievalism’ has finally been acknowledged as a legitimate discipline. It has found its place among university courses in the UK, the USA and Australia. Regular medievalist sessions are organised in Kalamazoo, Leeds, and at the meetings of the Medieval Academy of America and the New Chaucer Society. This field of study has now its own offspring, namely ‘Neomedievalism’. In the preface to his book, Alexander writes that when early medievalism developed in the 1760s, with revivals realised in literature and architecture, it was “experimental and uncertain.” (Kingham xii) In many areas of artistic activity it is no longer so, which is evidenced by many examples of medieval themes in films, novels, games or comic books. The reception of medieval culture is inescapable in the twenty-first-century reality with its plethora of works available plenty in both print and digital media. The American film industry relies heavily on its fascination with the Middle Ages: *Robin Hood*, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, BBC’s *The White Queen* or *Game of Thrones* are only a few examples to showcase the range of medieval influence that is continuously being imprinted on the contemporary Digi-modern culture.

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Discourse of Power and Resistance in

Poile Sengupta's *Samara's Song*:

A Foucauldian Reading

Samim Aktar Molla

ABSTRACT

Poile Sengupta's play *Samara's Song* delves into the complex relationship between power, truth, memory, and resistance in a nation gripped by authoritarian politics. It is not simply a political drama about authoritarian rule; it is a searching theatrical inquiry into the ways by which power enters language, history, memory, bodies, and everyday behaviour. The play imagines a nation where democracy survives as vocabulary while its ethical substance is steadily hollowed out. Through the Thandwai's invisible command, Uri's administrative violence, Hamun's manipulation of documents, Gandava's remaking into a political instrument, and Samara's wordless song, Sengupta stages power as something more diffuse than the will of a ruler. It travels through announcements, rituals of mourning, police intelligence, classed speech, family secrecy, gendered obedience, and the official production of truth. Read through Michel Foucault's ideas of discourse, power/knowledge, discipline, normalization, and resistance, the play reveals how subjects are made governable not only by fear but also by narrative, visibility, and self-regulation. Yet the drama does not end by granting power the last word. Resistance appears in Arrah's memory, Gandava's troubled conscience, the damaged testimony of the three historians, and, most hauntingly, Samara's song. The play's achievement lies in showing that resistance

does not come from a pure space outside power; it rises from the same wounded field in which power operates.

Keywords: Poile Sengupta; *Samara's Song*; Michel Foucault; discourse; democracy; power/knowledge; Indian English drama; resistance.

To begin with Poile Sengupta's own note to *Samara's Song* is to enter the play through the door she deliberately leaves open. She calls the play "explicitly political" (Sengupta 433), but the politics she dramatizes is not restricted to elections, conspiracies, assassinations, or state offices. Her concern is more unsettling: how democracy becomes a language of legitimacy even when democratic life has disappeared. She asks whether equality remains "a slogan" and whether democracy may pass into despotism (433). This question is not merely thematic; it shapes the dramatic form itself. The street, the chamber, and the palace do not simply represent three social locations. They form a theatre of governance in which the populace, bureaucracy, and ruling family speak different languages, inhabit different rhythms, and yet remain caught within one apparatus of control.

The central argument of this essay is that *Samara's Song* presents power as a dispersed discursive force rather than as a possession held by one tyrant. The Thandwai is powerful, but the play is careful not to reduce domination to her personal cruelty. Power moves through press statements, staged grief, bureaucratic files, caste-class prejudice, gendered blackmail, police surveillance, and the rewriting of biography. Sengupta's drama is therefore deeply Foucauldian, not because it mechanically illustrates Foucault, but because it imagines political control as a network that produces subjects, regulates speech, and manufactures truth. At the same time, the play keeps alive Foucault's equally important insight that resistance is not external to power. It appears within damaged speech, within silence,

within memory, within the body that refuses to be fully absorbed into official meaning.

Foucault's usefulness for reading this play lies in his refusal to see power only as prohibition. In *Discipline and Punish*, power becomes modern by becoming minute, observational, classificatory, and normalizing. In *The History of Sexuality*, it becomes productive: it creates categories, identities, truths, and desires. *Samara's Song* dramatizes precisely such a field. The nation of Eos is not governed merely by soldiers or decrees. It is governed by the management of attention. People are made to watch screens, hear official voices, repeat rumours, mourn on cue, and distrust their own knowledge. Sengupta's prefatory emphasis on the "manipulation of language" (433) thus becomes a key to the whole play. Language is not decoration here. It is the first machinery of rule.

The opening movement of the play already establishes this politics of speech. Arrah and Mati wait for water, and their rough, quarrelsome, affectionate language immediately locates them among the urban poor. Their speech is broken, comic, abusive, tender, and alive. It carries hunger, fatigue, humour, and survival. Against this living language enters the Thandwai's amplified address, mediated through a portable screen. The contrast is devastating. Arrah's world is made of scarcity: water comes after three days. The Thandwai's voice is made of nation-building abstractions, public mourning, and rehearsed tenderness. The people must grieve because the screen instructs them to grieve. Even water seems politically timed, prompting one woman to remark that it has arrived so that people may wash their faces before crying. Sengupta thereby places basic life and political spectacle in the same frame. Governance is not simply the provision of water; it is the ability to convert deprivation into emotion and emotion into obedience.

This is why the Thandwai's absence is theatrically more powerful than her presence would have been. For much of the play she remains behind curtains, behind voice-overs, behind commands. She is not

seen, but she is heard. Her invisibility does not weaken her; it enlarges her. Like the unseen centre of disciplinary power, she organizes conduct by producing the sense that she may be everywhere. The crowd knows this instinctively. A woman says that the Thandwai has the “whole country” in her fist (444). The phrase is crude but politically exact. The state is felt as grip: intimate, bodily, suffocating. Yet that grip is mediated through rituals of mourning and claims of democratic propriety. When Princess Sabah mockingly questions the reality of elections, the Thandwai replies that theirs is a democratically elected government. Sengupta’s irony is sharp: democracy is invoked most insistently when it has become least credible.

Uri’s function in this structure is more immediate. If the Thandwai is the invisible voice of sovereignty, Uri is the practical eye of discipline. He does not merely threaten Gandava; he instructs him in how to stand, speak, remember, and forget. His warning about the “special police” (448) is not an isolated threat. It introduces Gandava into a world where being watched is already a form of punishment. “Do you want that?” he asks after describing hanging, and Gandava’s body answers before his words do. He kneels. Later Uri strikes his head down and orders him not to forget himself. This small gesture is one of the play’s most Foucauldian moments. It is not only humiliation; it is training. The body is corrected into class position. Gandava must learn where to look, how to pronounce, when to obey, and what kind of self he is permitted to possess.

The remaking of Gandava is the play’s most sustained exploration of power/knowledge. At first he appears as an opportunistic marginal man, hungry for advancement, eager to escape poverty, yet not entirely without tenderness or fear. The officials see his vulnerability at once. He has no secure genealogy, no social protection, no linguistic prestige, and no institutional record strong enough to resist alteration. This makes him useful. Hamun and Uri do not simply conceal his past; they manufacture a new one. A missing childhood, a flood in the north, a lost family, a mark on the body, a recast birth chart—

these fragments are assembled into political truth. The absurdity is grotesque, but its logic is chilling. Uri says that Gandava's "recorded life history" has begun with them (471). The Blind Man's response, linking this claim to civilization and historiography, gives the moment a broader resonance. The state is not only lying; it is producing the archive through which the lie will become reality.

Here Sengupta's drama moves beyond a simple moral opposition between truth and falsehood. Gandava's new identity works because institutions authorize it. A name, a body, a document, a ceremony, a rumour, a press report—together they form a discursive shell that others begin to recognize. This is why Foucault's idea of power/knowledge matters. Knowledge in the play is not neutral information waiting to be discovered. It is fabricated, certified, repeated, and made operational. Gandava becomes Prince Ruak not because he has changed in essence, but because the machinery around him has learned to say so. Identity here is less a private interior truth than a public arrangement of signs.

Language becomes central to this arrangement. Hamun's instruction that Gandava must "stop speaking Kurubiri" (467) is one of the play's quiet acts of violence. On the surface, it is a practical demand: a fabricated prince cannot sound like a subaltern outsider. But Arrah understands what the officials do not, or do not care to understand. A language is not an ornament one removes before entering the palace. It carries memory, kinship, body rhythm, shame, desire, and belonging. To take away Kurubiri is to loosen Gandava from the world that once made him intelligible to himself. When he later returns in rich clothes and tells Samara and Arrah that he has lost his eyes, ears, and tongue, the palace has already done its work. It has dressed him, renamed him, desired him, used him, and emptied him.

This is where the play's treatment of class oppression becomes inseparable from its treatment of discourse. The poor in *Samara's Song* are not silent because they have nothing to say. They are silenced

because their speech does not count within the official order. Arrah speaks fiercely, Mati screams, the crowd mutters, Gandava pleads, Samara sings. Yet the state hears only what it can translate into use: rumour, spectacle, threat, vote, labour, sexual availability, or public emotion. Sengupta's prefatory comment that the ultimate tragedy belongs to those who "cannot articulate" (433) must therefore be read in both literal and political senses. Samara's muteness matters, but so does the larger condition in which the marginalized speak without being recognized as bearers of truth.

Samara is the still centre of this drama of articulation. She does not enter the political plot in any conventional sense, yet the play is named after her song. This title is important. The song is not an escape from politics; it is the deepest counterpoint to political speech. The stage direction describes it as wordless, moving from famine and thirst into lullaby, grief into care. It cannot be absorbed into the Thandwai's announcements or the historians' ledgers. It is not evidence, not propaganda, not policy, not testimony in the official sense. Yet it carries what the play values most: a memory of suffering that has not been converted into strategy. When Samara sings, the drama asks us to listen to what cannot be handled by the language of governance.

The three historians complicate this question of listening. Sengupta describes them as a modified Greek chorus and Indian sutradhar, impaired in their recording of events (434). This device is not merely comic or decorative. It is a profound theatrical criticism of historiography. One is blind, one deaf, one mute; each carries a damaged relation to truth. Their ledgers suggest the authority of record, but their quarrels, gaps, and absurdities expose the fragility of all recording. History in the play is never a calm repository of fact. It is partial, bodily, argumentative, and compromised. The historians watch what the state hides, but even they cannot fully master what they witness. Their presence keeps reminding us that truth is never outside mediation.

In this respect, *Samara's Song* belongs to the larger tradition of modern Indian drama that uses fractured form to interrogate public life. Critics such as Aparna Dharwadker and Erin Mee have shown how post-Independence Indian theatre repeatedly turns to experiment, mythic displacement, and non-naturalistic devices to examine the pressures of modernity and politics. Sengupta's difference lies in the way she fuses political allegory with an almost tactile attention to voice and body. Her stage is not abstractly political. It is full of water pots, curtains, ledgers, headphones, walking sticks, screens, scarves, wounds, and songs. These objects matter because they show power at work in lived forms.

The palace, for instance, is never simply a place of luxury. For Gandava, it becomes carceral. When he returns to the street and says there is "no palace" (496), the rest of the line makes clear that splendour has become imprisonment. The rich clothes do not elevate him; they mark his capture. Princess Sabah's desire for him also belongs to this politics of the body. She is herself trapped within dynastic expectation, maternal manipulation, and gendered rivalry, yet she exercises power over Gandava through class and sexuality. Sengupta refuses to make her either merely victim or villain. Sabah has knowledge, and knowledge gives her leverage; she has been watching doors and windows, collecting secrets. But her agency remains parasitic upon the very structure that wounds her. She can expose, blackmail, desire, command; she cannot imagine freedom outside the palace game.

This is why the play's resistance is never simple. Arrah's resistance is ethical and affective. She protects Samara, remembers Kurubiri, and recognizes the violence hidden beneath social advancement. Yet she too is drawn into the cycle of revenge, killing Mati when Samara dies. Gandava's resistance is belated and fractured. He senses danger before he understands it; he wants to run but cannot; he recognizes his loss only after the state has consumed him. The crowd's resistance is equally unstable. Its rumour can become insight, but its anger can also become mob violence. Sengupta therefore does not romanticize

the oppressed. She shows how domination deforms the very energies that might oppose it.

The final movement of the play is consequently tragic without being nihilistic. The Thandwai's order collapses, but collapse does not automatically produce justice. The crowd storms the palace, bodies fall, Samara is dead, Sabah is killed, the Thandwai is poisoned, and Deyeth survives helplessly. The Blind Man's reflection on power and blood does not offer consolation. It asks whether the rising of the masses changes their condition or merely gives them a brief, terrible taste of the same force that had ruled them. This is a severe political question. Revolution may interrupt domination, but it does not guarantee liberation. Sengupta's play is most powerful when it keeps this difficulty open.

And yet, after violence, there is still the song. Gandava dresses Samara's dead body in the clothes he had promised her, turning political costume back into a failed love-gift. Arrah, who enters with a bloody knife, moves from revenge to recognition. Deyeth, weak and broken, asks whether she wants to kill him. She drops the knife and holds him. The gesture is small, but in a play crowded with spectacle, it matters precisely because it is not spectacle. It is not recorded as policy; it does not become a broadcast; it does not restore the nation. It simply interrupts vengeance. In that interruption, Sengupta locates a fragile human possibility.

The final image of the historians tying scarves around one another's organs of perception and speech is among the play's most haunting theatrical gestures. The Blind Man says he "was blinded" (520), and his companions similarly confess the cost of hearing and speaking. This is not an admission of ignorance alone. It is an indictment of history itself. To see such violence is to be wounded by it; to hear it is to lose the innocence of hearing; to speak it is to risk being silenced. The chorus that had tried to record events ends by embodying the

mutations of witness. Official history may tidy catastrophe into explanation, but Sengupta's theatre leaves the wound visible.

Read through Foucault, then, *Samara's Song* becomes a drama of manufactured truth and unfinished resistance. It shows that power does not merely descend from the ruler to the ruled. It circulates through institutions, families, bodies, screens, rumours, files, accents, rituals, and desires. It normalizes itself by making domination appear as mourning, accuracy, decorum, loyalty, democracy, or destiny. But the play also shows that no discourse can completely secure the field it governs. Samara's song exceeds language; Arrah's memory exceeds policy; Gandava's anguish exceeds his fabricated identity; the historians' fractured record exceeds the state archive. Even the crowd's whispers, however unstable, exceed official performance.

The achievement of Sengupta's play lies in its refusal to separate politics from the intimate textures of life. Governance is present in water, in speech, in marriage, in grief, in dress, in the body's posture, in what one is allowed to remember. That is why the play remains more disturbing than a direct denunciation of tyranny would have been. It reveals how easily democracy can become a theatre of managed feeling, and how difficult it is to preserve truth when every institution has learned to perform it. Yet *Samara's Song* does not surrender to despair. It leaves us with a song that cannot be translated into power's grammar. It is wounded, wordless, and persistent. In that persistence lies the play's hardest hope.

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*Madwomen in the Attic: Deconstructing Power
Dynamics and Urban Space in Mahesh Dattani's
Bravely Fought the Queen.*

Suraiya Sultana

ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault analyses the changing scenarios of penalty from public domains to the constant surveillance in carceral system. However, Foucault's analysis involves the creation of docile bodies and minds through the application of disciplinary tactics. In Indian society, the revolution in business and technical spheres brings about myriad alterations in traditional families, where women's bodies are either exclusively imprisoned in domestic space, or displayed in commercial spaces for advertisement and pecuniary benefits. Mahesh Dattani, a famous Indian playwright, voices practical social concerns through his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* where he puts a contrast between the space of men and that of women of his time. The present paper will examine how the attitudes of Indian men create submissive bodies of women who are incarcerated in familial space for a long time. Nonetheless, Dattani through his theatrical performances, deconstructs the power dynamics in postcolonial Indian society, thereby opening new spaces for the women to construct their identities in groundbreaking ways.

Keywords: Docile bodies, power, carceral, disciplines, family.

INTRODUCTION:

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault identifies a change from overt, physical punishments to covert, invisible control of a soul. He explores the production of certain types of epistemology, organizations and professionals facilitating the creation of subjects. For Foucault, modern society constructs the identities of people through the binary of normal/abnormal and healthy/diseased. He holds that power relations govern the movements of human body. New power structures target the body, and new discourse is generated around the use of corporeal tactics. For him, a body is “docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”(136). Foucault examines the ways disciplinary measures shape human behavior and gestures. In this way, the body becomes a vehicle for invisible forces. As he says, “Disciplinary power has...an individuality...natural and organic”(Foucault 156).

Foucault claims that the technique of subjection creates a new object - the natural body which is prone to specific operations guided by order, internal conditions (155). Human body undergoes the useful training in such way that natural requirements and functional restraints come from it. Thus, the body enters the relations imbued with power. Therefore, paradigms of power are found not only in prisons, military camps and hospitals, but also in family.

Urban space has undergone innumerable structural changes in present time. It foregrounds not only the power difference between the wealthy class and the poor in myriad forms, but also that of men and women. Urban space is the arena creating multiple opportunities for women in the labour markets. In many cases, women's freedom is increased. On the other hand lies the issues of safety of women. It is supposed that women can enjoy greater facilities of life in the city. Henri Lefebvre says that spaces are produced out of necessities and that the connections of human beings and the spaces are inseparable. For Lefebvre, social space is embedded with two types of relationships

– a) reproductive relations (sexuality, family) and b) productive relations (division of labour and its social hierarchy). Since the two relations are complementary, they always work on the urban space to foreground power dynamics. The distinction of power between men and women is one crucial factor which must be analysed in the context of family relations. Indian society is ridden with power politics and domination of men over women. The female body is controlled by the operations of patriarchy. Women are made submissive through the different levels of power in familial space. Mahesh Dattani in *Bravely Fought the Queen* shows the repression and submissive conditions of the Trivedi wives for two generations. Baa, Jiten Trivedi's mother, is oppressed by her husband whose despotic attitude imposes a strong impression in her mind. Dolly and Alka Trivedi are oppressed by Baa who never gets rid of her old memories.

DOCILE BODIES AND POWER

The play is set in a suburban area of Bangalore. Baa suffers from a stroke and becomes bed-ridden in her old age. The story centers on an upper class family where the women's freedom is restricted by the tyrannical males. Baa was forced to repudiate her singing habit by her husband. She mournfully looks back to the past, "He asked me before marrying him if I will sing!" (BFQ 57) Baa remembers her husband as a dark figure due to his violence and anger. Baa says, "The children should see what a demon you are" (BFQ 47). Her husband hits her face and spends the money inherited from her father. It is evident in Baa's speech, "Mine! Every paisa is mine! Mine from my father!" (BFQ 47). Baa has left her hobbies of public singing because of the strong disapproval from the autocratic husband who constantly tortures her. Baa is afraid of her husband who is "as black as night!" (BFQ 42). Baa cannot change her wounded psyche and dislikes her daughters-in-law and their trips outside home. She harshly treats them and orders Alka to rub her back. She consoles herself temporarily because she is blessed with two sons. She can be a good mother but never a good

mother-in-law. Alka blames Baa for not having a child, "You won't let us! You want him to hate me!" (BFQ 54)

Dolly, wife of Jiten Trivedi, seldom gets the chance of outing with her husband for recreation. After a long time she becomes joyful at the prospects of outing. She puts mud musk on her face to become beautiful. Dolly and Alka are entirely ignorant of the official activities of their husbands. Naturally, a lack of communication between husband and wife prevails within the family. Dolly listens to thumri in order to overcome the boredom. Alka, wife of Nitin Trivedi, is equally neglected by her husband. Alka drinks wine to forget her bad marriage "discovering the pleasures of alcohol" (BFQ 25). The Trivedi brothers have twin houses "Right in the middle of nowhere" (BFQ 8). Neither they have neighbours, nor they have supportive family members. The women are confined and isolated within the apparently complacent houses. Alka censures Dolly for her reserved nature, "...you just sit in a corner sipping your lime juice and speak when spoken to" (BFQ 17). In this context, Cisney and Morar affirm,

"Foucault notes that domination occurs in myriad ways, at all levels of society: not just between de facto political rulers and subjects, but between lovers, spouses, parents and children...in all relations of life" (Why Biopower? 2)

Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* delineates the confinement of Bertha in the house of Rochester. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic* alludes to the character of Bertha Mason, thereby reinforcing the dichotomous roles of women either as angels or monsters. Being ignored by her husband Nitin, Alka learns to be apathetic by allowing distractions. The inmates of the Mettray, as Foucault argues, learn the skills of the prison through the techniques imposed on the body (294). Similarly, the wives of the Trivedi brothers induce within themselves a mode of behaviour which strengthens the clarification of Foucault – "a soul to be known and a subjection to be maintained" (295).

Jiten and Nitin Trivedi intend to launch a new brand of women nightwear. Their motives are entirely guided by mercenary pursuits. Female body is commodified for catering to pleasures of the male. Henri Lefebvre claims that connection of a human being to space or society indicates relations to his or her body. "Social practice presupposes the use of the body: the use of hands, members and sensory organs..." (40). Bodies are represented with combination of ideology. Bodies' relations with surroundings are significant because of the intervention of culture through a variety of symbols. People become signs in this context where women are not makers, rather bearers of meaning. Therefore, the female sex is bounded by a symbolic order in which the men play their fantasies and thrust the image of woman. This is the way in which the disciplinary power has invaded all spheres of human life. It is similar to what Michel Foucault says in *Discipline and Punish*,

"Discipline...had its own type of ceremony...the subjects were presented as objects to the observation of a power that was manifested only by its gaze" (188).

For Foucault, the will to exercise power defeats the egalitarian views, thereby positing the marginal figures as irrational. Just as the lawyers, doctors, and the influential figures establish dominant discourses in society by marking criminals and patients respectively, images of women are constructed and maintained for long years in patriarchal discourse. Jiten, a robust representative of patriarchal society, possesses a dominating attitude. Being a lecherous man, he views the women as nothing but sexual entities. For him, men possesses value in society for their earning abilities. That's why he discards the opinions of women customers and orders Sridhar to focus on men for market survey. His own desire is evident when he states, "... they have the buying power"(BFQ 45).

Not only Jiten oppresses women, but also he abuses men. He manipulates the amiable nature of his brother-in-law Praful and treats the latter like "a crap...nothing" (BFQ 37). Jiten plans to sell the old house whose value is one and half crore in the present market. He calls

Nitin 'sentimental fool' for his unwillingness to sell it. He persuades Nitin to throw Alka from his house and to divorce her. While driving recklessly, Jiten knocks down an auto parked on the road and bullies the auto driver. Apart from this, Jiten's conversation with Sridhar is dubious. It shows the power dynamics of individuals residing in urban space. Jiten, albeit a hypocrite, possesses wealth and upper hand over Sridhar. Sridhar suggests Jiten to change the campaign for its offensive nature on the women clients. But Jiten threatens him to sack from job. Thus the commercial relations assume the form of social existence through relational nexus (Lefebvre 120). Jiten insists Sridhar to bring a prostitute in his office and boasts of the advantage of his office on Grant Road, "No checking"(BFQ 56).

Mahesh Dattani poses contrast to the Trivedi family through the conjugal relations of Lalitha and Sridhar. Lalitha, albeit unemployed, is a lady of independent thinking and writer. Sridhar, an advertising employee of the Trivedi brothers, shares everything of his working life with his wife Lalitha. In order to buy a dwelling place, Sridhar works diligently in the office of the Trivedi. Lalitha informs Dolly of the impending ball dance where the model "will wear a black cloak and mask which she'll remove at midnight to reveal the Re Va Tee nightwear" (BFQ 21). Lalitha busies herself with lots of activities. She collects saplings of any tree and shapes the branches by pinching and trimming them. By nurturing bonsais, she becomes so deeply connected with them that she refuses the tour to Goa. Lalitha says, "I just couldn't imagine leaving my bonsais with the neighbour...I can be quite stubborn" (BFQ 22).

Body represents the space of society. Through the paralysed body of Baa, oppression of the women are highlighted. Henri Lefebvre holds the body as a spatial body, "A body...is immediately subject to the determinants of that space: symmetries, interactions and reciprocal actions..." (195). The office of Jiten Trivedi is decked with a large photograph of a seductive model. Through the advertisement of

the new product, sensuous themes are presented to demean the status of women. As Foucault notes,

“We are in a society of sex...the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life...Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species...power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality... it’s insidious presence, the fact that it was everywhere and object of excitement and fear at the same time” (*The Foucault Reader* 269).

Within the suburban homes, the women negotiate their roles as caregivers. There is no way of communication with the neighbours. Like the disciplinary practices of the school and correction house, they are obliged to maintain the domestic chores, such as caring the sick mother-in-law who calls them to massage her body. One of the distinct characters of the prison, as Foucault identifies, is the denial of individual liberty (*The Foucault Reader* 215). The female members of the Trivedi family are bereft of personal independence. Apparently, there is no redress of their plights. Being female, they have abandoned the pleasures of lives to satisfy the requirements of the males who have locked them in cells and rendered them passive. The prison serves the place of surveillance of the inmates’ demeanour. Jiten is familiar with the behaviour of Dolly, especially her tailoring habits. The house of Jiten symbolizes the carceral regime where the females undergo penitentiary practices and Baa persistently intercepts the autonomy of the Trivedi wives. Despite the ordeal, the women of the Trivedi family are neglected by the husbands. That’s why Dolly makes an amorous affair with the young cook Kanhaiya and Alka consumes drink (whisky, rum) to forget the misery of marriage with a homosexual. Even before marriage, Alka was punished by Praful for riding the scooter of a male friend.

The twin houses are embodiments of what Lefebvre calls the predominance of visual-spatial regimes. Although Lalitha appreciates the beautiful house where Dolly resides, the houses are situated in an inconvenient place, quite distanced from the din and bustle of the city. Alka affirms, “...living so far away from the city, we have learnt to be

sort of...” (BFQ 29). Lefebvre holds that the city and the house have qualities of memory. For him, emotional intensities of human beings can be expressed in street violence, in buildings and in the homes of the well-offs. Lefebvre further claims that bourgeois homes express covert sexuality and that the construction of building is imagined in terms of a family which reproduces (315). Therefore, the houses of the Trivedi brothers replicate the patrimonial authority and connote a space where voices of the female counterparts are subdued. It is the house which shelters the crippled child like Daksha. Overall, the Trivedi house produces a masculine space which functions to replicate the values of the powerful. It does not permit any other space (feminine) as it is characterized by insolence and callousness.

CONCLUSION

Postmodernists argue that discourse is not only a means of controlling individuals, it often goes beyond them. A society is imbued with discourses from top to bottom. The more dominant a discourse is, the more natural it seems to be within a society. People incorporate the subordinating norms within themselves. Nonetheless, it implies subversion of dominant discourses. In this context, Foucault claims that how much terrifying a system may be, there lies the probabilities of opposition and resistance (*The Foucault Reader* 245).

However, stereotypical roles are questioned by Dolly. Like Nora, in *A Doll's House*, Dolly resists the patriarchal discourse in Act III of the play. Thus, stereotypes are deconstructed and challenged by Dattani's women characters in the final Act. Dolly exposes the cause of Daksha's premature birth. Jiten with the instigation of Baa severely beats pregnant Dolly and she suffers. As Dolly says, “They were your hands hitting me!” (BFQ 82). Dolly is overwhelmed by the passion of Naina Devi for singing love songs. Naina Devi married “into royalty... could have lived her life comfortably in royal grace” (BFQ 65). Naina Devi's husband supported her to cherish her dreams by defying contemporary social norms. In her time, the lower class women

sang thumri to entertain the mass. However, Naina Devi became the queen of thumri overcoming all the familial and societal obstacles. In contrast, Dolly is deprived of love and affection from her husband. Lalitha suggests a poem celebrating the bravery of the Queen of Jhansi in the Sepoy Mutiny. Dolly destabilizes the power dynamics of the male through her emotional outburst. She reminds Jiten of all his misdeeds and injustice and vehemently opposes his control. She gathers her strength and bravely asserts (to Jiten), “What will you do? Kill me? Then you will have to kill Daksha as well!” (BFQ 79)

Like the first person narrator in *When I Hit You*, Dolly boycotts the male domination by uttering the bitter truth. Furthermore, Alka discloses the representation of power by cursing Praful who gets rid of his responsibility by marrying his sisters to the wicked men. In Act III, Alka shows indifference towards the slandering remarks of Jiten. She subverts the traditional rules by drinking rum in front of Jiten. Dattani indicates the collapse of patriarchal supremacy through the assertion of the women’s voice in the final act. Dolly and Alka resist the normalisation of patriarchal violence in familial space. Thus, the Trivedi house becomes a dynamic space opening new possibilities for changing roles of women. It is the new space where servitude of the women would no longer be continued.

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Unveiling the Richness of Indian Theatre:

Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela

Chitaranjan Taorem & I Gambhir Singh

ABSTRACT

India is a country renowned for its rich culture and traditions. The country is also endowed with a diverse theatrical heritage, with various drama and performance art forms that have evolved over centuries, such as Nacha of Chhattisgarh, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Kallariyattu of Kerala, and Shumang Leela of Manipur. Such culture, arts, and traditions have the potential to be analysed and subsequently contribute to the betterment or refinement of any society or individual. These art forms, especially Shumang Leela and Naya theatre, embrace the darker aspects of society, societal issues and maladies, political upheavals, and the dynamics of society and showcase them through their art, awakening the masses and making them aware of what is happening in society. The study aims to compare and analyse these two forms of Indian theatres, Naya theatre and Shumang Leela, juxtaposing them to highlight their roles in society.

Key Words: Theatre, Shumang Leela, Naya Theatre,
Society, Socio-Political and Culture.

INTRODUCTION:

Naya Theatre was founded by Habib Tanvir in 1959, following his return from London, where he gained experience at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He realised that the Western theatre theory he had learned could not be applied to modern Indian theatre.

Though he was not pursuing any particular folk form, he was well aware that there were so many unused or unexplored talents in the rural areas where folk forms of theatre were found in abundance. By introducing them Naya Theatre, he provided a platform to showcase their skills, and thus, he blended classical and folk forms, preserving many forgotten folk traditions, including “Nacha”. He also promoted the oral cultural tradition and revolutionised the theatre world by allowing his folk performers whom he discovered during his Nacha Workshops including Fida Bai Markam, Madanlal, Thakur Ram, Lalu Ram, Govind Ram, Bhulwa Ram, and Deepak Tiwari, among others to present their skills in their own dialect

The Manipuri Folk Theatre, known as “Shumang Leela” (Courtyard Play), is a traditional Manipuri play that has played a crucial role in entertaining and spreading socio-political awareness to the masses, as well as educating people in Manipuri society. Shumang Leela was officially recorded by the State for the first time in the year 1918, with the play ‘*Harischandra*’ Leela. However, the concept of the Shumang Leela was started much earlier during the reign of King Chandrakriti (1851-1886) in clown form, though some research scholars opined that Shumang Leela descended from a ritual ceremony of Manipur called ‘Lai Haraoba’, which is being translated as a pleasing of God by men in Shakespearean terms, going up to the mythological period. Shumang Leela is typically performed in an area of approximately 13 feet by 13 feet. However, the area depends on the availability of space, ideally located in the centre of any open space, such as a courtyard or playground. According to the Manipur State Shumang Leela Council, the Moirang Parva performed at Wahengbam Leikai Panjee Mayum Lampak in 1894/95 at Imphal West district was the first Shumang Lila performance. Some of the earliest Shumang Leela performances included *Harishchandra* (1918), *Meiraba Charan*, *Thok Lila*, and *Sabitri Seitaban*, among others. Shumang Leela since its beginning always concerned itself about what is happening in the society, for instance- when a gifted artist called Chungkham

Ibohal and his troupe performed a satirical play against the water tax levied on the people using the Imphal River during the reign of King Churachand (1891-1941), the king on hearing this arrested the artists and made them perform the play in front of him.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NAYA THEATRE AND SHUMANG LEELA:

Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela, both forms of performing arts, share some similarities and differences in their forms and styles. The analysis includes their themes, performance, origin and the kind of actors or actresses they have. For instance, unlike proscenium theatre, both Naya theatre and Shumang Leela can be performed anywhere, even without a stage. It can be performed in the middle of the field, the courtyard, or the playground, surrounded on all four sides by the audience, so that the performance will be visible and audible. However, they do leave some small passage on one side of the field, which connects the performance area and the green room and which also serves as an entrance and exit for the artists.

The performance of these actors can be seen not only on the main stage (in the middle of the courtyard/playground) but also in the small passage that connects the green room, which makes the audience feel like they are watching a real-life situation. Additionally, both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela have become platforms for entertainment, addressing various themes such as comedy, farce, folklore, legends, humanity, culture, education, and socio-political issues in our contemporary society. Even today, in the 21st century, the magic of the Shumang Leela goes upwards to touch the sky, as in Habib's Naya Theatre. So, there is a tremendous increase in the number of audiences. Due to its popularity and demand, many television service providers cover these plays and make them easily available on the internet. Another important fact about these two forms of theatre is that the performers in the play are paid actors. In Naya Theatre, it's the Chhattisgarhi folk artist, whereas in

Shumang Leela, it's the professional theatre troupe like Peace Maker Association, Sanaleipak Nachom Artiste, and others, which has been a part of the Manipuri Shumang Leela Council. These days, however, owing to the bandh and strike culture in Manipur imposed by various organisations against any kind of entertainment, the livelihood of these artists has been affected. The same problem occurred when Naya Theatre presented *Ponga Pandit* to the audience, and many right-wing organisations came and banned the plays in the 1960s. One of the most interesting facts about these two forms of theatre is that almost every play performed by these troupes consistently portrays how upper-class society ill-treats the lower caste and speaks about the downtrodden, and so, somehow, knowingly or unknowingly, there is an influence of Marxist ideals. Another interesting aspect is that both of these theatres employ the non-literary elements of epic theatre, as practised by Bertolt Brecht, such as music, stagecraft, décor, and external aids like facial expression and body language.

Both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela are examples of Brechtian views on theatre, which is of a simple human voice talking to a human audience. The Brechtian views on theatre are supported by the performance of Sanaleipak Nachom Artist in Manipuri language at the Bolshoi theatre in Moscow (Russia) in 2001, and the performance of *Charandas Chor*, which was performed in Edinburgh and won the Fringe First Award, despite being played in Chhattisgarhi language. The importance of folk music has been effectively portrayed through the use of folk music and instruments in both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela. Another similarity between these two theatres is that there is not a single full-time paid actor. Naya Theatre artists are paid by Habib Tanvir from the revenues he collects while performing his plays, whereas Shumang Leela artists receive dakshina from the local club that organises such plays, or from well-wishers or patrons as a token of appreciation for their performance.

On the contrary, Habib uses both the actor and the actress in his play, in Shumang Leela, only the male artists are allowed to take the

role of both the male and female in the play, although in its early stages, some groups of women did participate in this folk play. However, the 1950s saw the emergence of the Nupi saabi - a male actor who performs a female role in Shumang Leela, since female artists were forced to drop out due to the conservative Manipuri society, which did not take kindly to its women travelling and performing with men in far-flung neighbourhoods. Since then, the Nupi Saabi- a male artist acting as a female, occupied the places of the female artist and with the help of costumes and make-up, they appeared far more feminine than the female herself. The seriousness of these Shumang Leela actors can be reflected in their performances, as they train themselves and produce their voices in a feminine chord, but when it comes to the scene of songs, the male background singers who sits in the front row with the audience usually sing in both male and female voices as per the requirement. The most interesting parts of Shumang Leela these days are the performance of the “Nupi Saabi” (male actress), and the presence of Nupi Saabi in the Shumang Leela holds the popular imagination of the audience. A striking contrast lies in these actors’ lives: on stage, as Nupi Saabi, they adorn feminine attire, embody delicate mannerisms, and modulate their voices to a tender, womanly pitch—yet offstage, they seamlessly return to the unassuming demeanour of ordinary men. The absence of women folk in the Shumang Leela plays due to the patriarchal society gave a platform to the transgender with an artistic zeal to perform as actress according to their heart’s wishes and its content, so in a way the theatre brings these transgenders under the limelight and in the gaze of the society out of their seclusion and marginalisation. An ironic point this paper highlights regarding the patriarchal Manipuri society is that, although the society removes the platform for female artists to perform in the Shumang Leela, the audience of the Shumang Leela is mostly women, despite the plays being performed until midnight. A uniqueness of Shumang Leela is that there is no opening or closing of the curtain, and, in fact, there is no curtain altogether.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion this study establishes that unlike cinema, a kind of entertainment where the audiences are usually absorbed in the constructed nature of the films which is being shown in the screen, these folk theatres i.e Naya theatre and Shumang Leela conveys the message towards the audience to be intellectually aware of the issues raised in the performed play rather than becoming emotionally immersed in it or forgetting the constructed nature of what they are watching and instead thinking for oneself about the issues raised in the plays. Therefore, they possess the quality to enlighten and develop an intellectual debate in the minds of the people; similarly to the oral cultural tradition in North East India, where the elders of the villages or towns narrate traditional folk tales towards the younger generation in their spare time, so as to absorb the morales and values and to pass down their past history of intellectual activity in order to preserve their culture and bridge the gap between the generations, and also an invitation to how one can participate and contribute towards it. Naya theatre or Shumang Leela or any other kind of traditional theatre which preserves one's culture is as important as any other official document which has been kept in the briefcase, since there is not even a single point to deny the statement that 'when people forget the past, its future is dim'. Therefore, these theatres become the most effective medium of Media, as they are more preferred by the locals and are especially designed for them. These folk theatres, which serve as a form of traditional media, are also well accepted by those who still lack educational opportunities due to various societal factors. Also, it must be mentioned that both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela consistently portray the picture of the poor's helplessness and their way of life. Therefore, these theatres are, in a way, realistic, but not the kind of removed form of existence that is being produced by mainstream Bollywood cinema, which a downtrodden person cannot relate to. The motives of the realistic plays in these theatres are not only to mirror society but also to create curiosity in the audience,

prompting them to learn more, and hence, the audience's inclination to learn further is maintained in these theatres. Therefore, the government should take the initiative to promote and protect these kinds of theatres by introducing more institutions like the National School of Drama, rather than collaborating with industrialists or the upper class.

Lastly, it is a matter of deepening regret that even in the 21st century, many people influenced by the bourgeoisie's thoughts think that being a theatre artist in society is useless and consider them as mere fools. So, it is our duty to wipe away such notions and ideas which the upper class propagates and bring up the voice of the common man. It is also sad to realise that many talented artists have left the theatre due to financial problems or due to political influences making their way into the theatre, whether by influencing it for their own gains or subjugating it to create a hostile environment for plays to be performed. Additionally, the wages for the theatre artists, which they receive for their performance, are very low, and many theatre artists cannot even maintain their own families. Though initiatives like Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana, Performing Arts Grants Scheme, under the government of India and Manipur's Chief Ministergi Artiste Sing Gi Tengbang (CMAT) are being taken up, many remain insufficient. These rewards are frequently inaccessible to grassroots theatre artists due to bureaucratic obstacles, urban bias, and limited outreach. Long-term artistic production is not supported by intermittent funding and meagre annuities under the Artistes' Pension Scheme. Their impact is further diminished by delayed payments due to the gaps between officials and artists. More regular and comprehensive support is required to encourage the arts and maintain cultural history, particularly for artists who use performance and conversation to define collective identity.

Comparing the wages of the theatre artist to the mainstream cinema, on the other hand, like Bollywood in India, actors and actresses are paid an exorbitant amount for a film, much more than

they can actually spend on acting and performance, which will make Habib Tanvir turn in his grave.

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Robots, Humans and Mothers: Reading *Cassandra* as Gothic.

Aparajita Hazra

ABSTRACT:

The notion of the ‘Human’ has always remained open-ended. Ever since the strains of the *Aufklärung* foregrounded intellection and scientific progress, the boundaries of the ‘Human’ have been stretched. The nexus between humans and machines and Artificial Intelligence is one open-ended site of interface that rouses marvel and awe as much as it rouses fear—fear of the unknown.

This paper will focus on *Cassandra*, a German webseries that showcases such a connection between humans and machines. The eponymous robot in the series, built by humans to aide humans in making life easier, turns into a monster, begins to take over, as ‘mother’, the control of the family it is supposed to serve, incarcerating, harming and finally threatening to kill them in the process.

This article will explore the *Unheimlich* created when AI deals in emotions and locks horns with the human world as we understand it. The paper will also analyse *Cassandra* the AI, as Monstrous Feminine and Abject. *Cassandra* will be discussed from the point of view of the orders of simulacra as Baudrillard explains in his chapter on Simulacra and Science Fiction. The article will partially take up the stance of posthumanism to raise important questions about the efficacy of artificial intelligence and the myriad ways the same can turn into a grotesque object of horror and terror—a Gothic reminder of what lies and could await beyond the bounds of human-ness.

Keywords: Human, Artificial Intelligence,
Cassandra, robot, *Unheimlich*, Monstrous
Feminine, Abject.

*Cassandra*¹ is a German Webseries, that is directed by Benjamin Gutsche, starring Lavinia Wilson, Mina Tander and Michael Klammer. Written by Sina Flammang and Benjamin Gutsche, the story showcases the titular Cassandra who is turned into a robot in order to cheat death by her scientist husband back in the 1970s. Years later in the 2000s, a happy family of four—Samira, her husband David and children Fynn and Juno move into Cassandra's house after buying it. Things take a sinister turn when Cassandra, a robot now, still keeps referring to the home as hers and the family as her family. There is a digital screen in every conceivable corner of the house with Cassandra's face on it, watching them, and waiting for instructions. Slowly it becomes evident that Cassandra is much more than just a robot. She understands. She feels. She emotes. Matters takes a turn for the worse as Cassandra ostensibly starts targeting Samira and eventually Cassandra succeeds in turning David, Fynn and Juno against Samira and causing her to be institutionalised for mental health. Cassandra then locks up the house completely, sealing all doors and windows, saying, now she herself, David, Fynn and Juno are a 'family'. All ends well with Samira coming back and setting things right once more. And like the original Greek Cassandra, this transhuman namesake too remains cursed never to be accepted, believed or fulfilled.

The series begins with an eerie and ominous metallic static noise that is removed from the human sensibility as digital, therefore signalling the presence of the non-human other, away from the usual Anthropocene. But the immediate shift of the camera angle to the interior of a car with a song being played on the music system and the driver nodding and finger-tapping along to it brings the semblance of normalcy back until seconds later the driver screeches to a halt at the sight of a terrible accident on the road, where the body of the man lies prostrate on the bonnet of the car, violently protruding out of the

shattered windshield, while a terrified woman huddles in the back seat with a child in her arms. As the rescuer guides the woman and the child out and asks, what happened the petrified woman replies, 'she's here', just as the camera pans out to reveal a robotic form standing close by, subverting the humanness of the pronoun, 'she'. The interface between man and machine, thus, is set out right at the beginning.

The adjective that best describes what I felt when I watched the webseries *Cassandra* for the first time, is 'unsettling'. So, where or what does the negative aesthetics of this unsettling gothic plot come from, in *Cassandra*?

Let's break it down. One realises that apart from the atmospheric music and suspenseful photographic angles, there are two core thematic axes of the Gothic that rouse fear here—Posthuman Gothic and the Domestic Gothic.

The first has to do with the seeming omnipotence of Artificial Intelligence which has the potential to prove to be an adversary to reckon with, for human beings. The mechanically powered *Cassandra* does everything from cooking to mowing to perfection. She even reels off the titles of every book authored by David, reminding the audience of 2026 uncannily of AI tools like Chat GPT and Gemini and Perplexity, and accelerating our fear of becoming the Other, of losing ourselves in a multitude of corporeal as well as discursive possibilities.

The fact that *Cassandra* attempts to take over Sam's entire world with her hybrid body, distributed agency, and technomaterially entangled existence is in itself very gothic as it symbolises the possibility of AI taking the human world over, thereby creating a digital dystopia for the Anthropocene.

The webseries, spanning out in six 50-ish-minute episodes, foregrounds the interface between man and machine, intelligence and artificial intelligence with the latter coming precariously near to annihilating the former. That was what was so unnerving about the show.

Posthuman Gothic explores the fear that rises from the more liminal states created by human-machine interface. Posthuman Gothic problematises concerns, fears and questions about the identity constructions that are stoked up by the uncanniness of the automaton– the almost-but-not-quite human cyborg or the abject, biotech human-machine hybrid.

Mary Shelley's 'hideous progeny', the epitomisation of one outside of the human(ist) paradigm, thereby deemed the monstrous Other once said, 'I was not even of the same nature as man . . . Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?'(Shelley,83) *Frankenstein*², the pioneering Gothic meta-text and emerging science fiction narrative, offers a vista into the complexity of 'living'-if it could be called so, outside of the human paradigm.

The very same outside-the-human-paradigm is explored in *Cassandra* too. *Cassandra*, in the eponymous web series, after her transformation into a robot, asks her scientist maker-husband: 'If I'm no longer human, what am I?' (S1: E5, 17:02), thereby reiterating the ontological aporia that haunts the human-machine dichotomy.

This destabilising of the essential ethical and epistemological paradigms of identity and the merging of human-machine borders, is what scares.

Apart from the question of liminality of identity, one more concern about the posthuman that intensifies the Gothic fear is the aporia about the many ways in which these processes can and will go wrong.

In the series, Samira voices fears concerning *Cassandra* that they 'don't know anything about this computer program. Or the kinds of errors it might run into' (S1:E2, 19:55)

David dismisses her saying 'Cassandra is made of zeroes and ones. It's just a computer program'. (S1: E2, 19: 23)

He also complacently reassures her that *Cassandra* can never be manipulative because she runs on algorithm. 'Cassandra doesn't

feel any emotions or plan schemes. She's not hu..(human)..it's software.' (S1: E2, 38:25) he says, only to be proved horribly wrong later down the plot.

The fact that Cassandra the AI takes over the autonomy of the human family becomes the site of terror, resulting in the evocation of the gothic. Gothic fear arises from the instability and ultimate unsustainability of our most basic ontological category – the human.

Cassandra, then, represents the ultimate digital dystopia of the Anthropocene, where algorithms usurp human agency, and simulated personalities take over physical spaces resulting in the terrifying collapse of ontological boundaries.

Now let's come to the second source of the Gothic in Cassandra: Domestic Gothic manifesting through how motherhood gone awry.

Adrienne Rich, in her 1976 text *Of Woman Born*³ (Rich 42), Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978)⁴ (Chodorow 85), explain that women are socio-culturally conditioned to have fluid emotional boundaries and a strong capacity for empathy and nurturing in order to live up to the roles of good woman and good Mother. And Alina Luna in her book, *Visual Perversity: A Re-articulation of the Maternal Instinct* (2004)⁵ warns that this often leads to disastrous results (Luna 55).

Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*⁶ (Kristeva 4) plumbs deep into how the maternal body is the first Abject, and how it is inherently terrifying because it weakens the boundaries between the self and the "other", refusing to let go and thereby threatening to consume the other back into the self-womb. Toxic motherhood is often more a byproduct of a patriarchal society that traps women in suffocating domestic spaces. Simone de Beauvoir⁷ said that one is not born a woman, but rather "becomes" one and Judith Butler said we 'perform' gender⁸. True enough society chalks out a Baudrillardian Hyperreal image of the 'Good woman', the 'Good Mother', which is a simulacrum that all women feel obliged to live up to. It's a copy of an idealized standard

that in modern capitalism, is supercharged by media, advertising, and AI algorithms. Women are lured to buy products, use fitness apps, and perform endless labour to conform to an idealised hyperreal form of perfect motherhood.

But the Gothic fallout of all this is that, this 'Good Mother' trope eventually gives birth to what is known as the 'Devouring Mother' or the 'Cannibal Mother' or the 'Toxic Mother' who often ends up creates a gothic Heterotopias out of the home which was supposed to be a safe place.

Motherhood is a concept that has always been shrouded in ambivalence. Despite the concept of motherhood as inherently nurturing and loving, maternal bond is often the suffocating, controlling, consuming and therefore, destructive carrier of patriarchy.

The mother who is herself oppressed by a rubric of patriarchal social expectations, often triggers off a vicious cycle of Toxic Projection by becoming hyper-controlling, and turning her frustration into emotional abuse and manipulation, or by projecting her own unfulfilled desires onto her children, just because she herself lacks agency within the male-dominated social sphere.

In *Cassandra*, it is evident that Cassandra Schmitt was forced to play the good wife and the good mother all her life in a home that was evidently run by the very patriarchal views of her husband Horst. The more like a repressed frustrated 'mad woman' she felt in her home, the more she exerted her control over her son Peter, turning him into defenceless, agency-robbed, Homo Nihili, a person of no value in his own home. Cassandra does not allow her son to grow up. She decides what game he should play and if he should play. She even decides how to dispose of the dead bodies when her son ends up murdering three fellow students. She does not allow Fynn to associate with his gay boyfriend, thereby curbing his sexual agency, which is a marker of individual maturity.

Melanie Klein in her book *The Psycho-Analysis of Children, Envy and Gratitude, and Love, Guilt and Reparation* explains that the Devouring Mother acts as the ultimate agent of patriarchy and capitalism⁹ (Klein 55). She wishes to prolong her effectiveness as the ‘good mother’ in her child’s life to validate her identity. As a result, the mother’s toxic nature manifests as an inability to let her child individuate. She refuses to “separate” from the child, thereby figuratively, but effectively “consuming” or swallowing them back into the womb. This makes her what is known as the ‘Cannibal Mother’. If the child resists, the mother splits her/him into the “Bad Child” and punishes her/him with existential guilt. As a result the child in turn, sees the punishing mother as the Bad Mother—the monster .

This is known as the Kleinian Connection or the Kleinian Split.

To survive this intense pressure, the child often develops a compliant False Self. They perform the gender role perfectly on the outside. But their true, authentic self gets buried in the process. And because this forced “becoming” is unnatural, the mind fractures, causing dissociative identity. Norman Bates in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* is an excellent example. This very form of Domestic Gothic plays out when Cassandra becomes the toxic Devouring mother in the family. Her son Peter, naturally exhibits classic dissociative identity, thereby showing up as the obedient polite introvert on the one hand, but then going and murdering three schoolmates who bullied him, on the other.

One of the ways in which Cassandra’s inexorable toxicity is cinematographically epitomised is through the Maternal Gaze. Cassandra the computer is in every single room, every single corner of the entire house being under her digital surveillance. This is a filmic symbolisation of the trope of the omniscient ‘Gaze’ of the Devouring mother just as her locking up the family later on, with all doors and windows sealed, is a representation of the ‘Locked Womb’.

This symbolic omnipresence of the mother in the child’s life, especially at home, prevents the home from being a safe place any

longer for the child. A heterotopia of liminality and aporia is created where the child feels drawn to and at the same time repelled by the idea of home as 'home' begins to equate with 'mother' and maternal control. The 'home' is no longer the safe haven for the child, but a prison of confinement—a locus for gothic claustrophobia and covert trauma as the mother's emotional toxicity refuses to back down.

The domestic Gothic sets in as home becomes prison exacerbated by the constant maternal gaze.

When Cassandra knows that she's dying of cancer, she tells her son, 'I'm not leaving you alone.' (S1: E5, 15:02) She describes herself saying, 'I'm not the kind of mother who leaves her children behind (S1: E5, 18:20).

Ironically, in a patriarchal social setup, a mother who asserts that she will never leave her children behind is deemed the ideal mother. But one realises that when the mother refuses to leave the child alone to individuate into an adult, she figuratively holds him prisoner in her own womb.

In the webseries, *Cassandra*, the robot's seemingly omniscient omnipresence is used as a visual metaphor to symbolise the devouring mother archetype, where the mother's constant lingering "gaze" mentally traps the child into an infantilized state.

And, deeper down, the fear that makes the webseries so gothic rises from the fact that the adversary here is a machine. The fact that the machine can potentially never die like humans and can possibly outlive them, terrifies one with the fear of an eternised ontological crisis.

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A Theatre– Based Padagogical Intervention for Fostering Cyber Wellness among Students

Janki Srivastava

ABSTRACT

The modern digital landscape has fundamentally transformed how students interact, learn, and socialize, bringing forth unprecedented opportunities alongside significant psychological and behavioral risks. Cyberbullying, screen addiction, and digital misconduct have become pervasive issues, necessitating robust cyber wellness educational programs in schools. Unfortunately, traditional pedagogical approaches often rely on passive information dissemination, which fails to foster the deep emotional engagement required for genuine behavioral change. This paper proposes a novel theatre-based intervention designed to enhance cyber wellness by leveraging experiential learning, role-play, and reflective dramatization. By placing students in immersive, relatable digital dilemmas, this pedagogical framework aims to bridge the gap between abstract cyber safety knowledge and practical, empathetic online behavior.

Key Words: Cyber Wellness, Theatre-Based Intervention, Experiential Learning, Cyberbullying, Digital Behavior, Emotional Regulation, Reflective Learning

INTRODUCTION

The famous assertion from William Shakespeare that “all the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players” remains

profoundly relevant in today's highly digitized society, where online platforms serve as new stages for social interaction. Among the most pressing concerns emerging from this heightened online exposure are cyberbullying, screen addiction, digital misconduct, and severe online stress. The constant pressure of digital connectivity has been shown to precipitate various health and psychological issues, including overwhelming anxiety, physical exhaustion, and diminished academic performance, which are increasingly recognizable as critical indicators of mental stress among student populations (Singh et al., 2024). Consequently, educational institutions are compelled to address these vulnerabilities not merely through technological restrictions, but through comprehensive educational frameworks.

In this context, the concept of cyber wellness has gained significant relevance in contemporary school education. Cyber wellness goes beyond the mere technical knowledge of cyber safety; it focuses fundamentally on fostering the responsible, ethical, balanced, and psychologically healthy use of digital technologies. It encompasses emotional resilience, digital empathy, critical thinking, self-control, and a profound respect for oneself and others in online spaces. Integrating cyber wellness into school curricula is therefore essential for nurturing well-rounded individuals who can navigate the digital world safely while maintaining their mental, social, and moral well-being.

Despite growing awareness, existing educational approaches are notably insufficient for cultivating true cyber wellness among students for several reasons. First, traditional methods largely rely on passive information dissemination through lectures, guidelines, and static rule-based instructions, which often fail to engage students at an emotional or experiential level. Second, these awareness-based programs emphasize restrictive "do's and don'ts" that students may memorize, yet they consistently fail to translate this cognitive knowledge into practical behavioral application when faced with real-life peer pressure online. This stark limitation highlights an

urgent need for innovative pedagogical strategies that actively involve learners, disrupt passive learning habits, and promote deeply reflective understanding.

To address these systematic gaps in digital education, this study introduces an experimental pedagogical framework utilizing theatre and dramatization. The objects of this paper are as follows:

- To address these systemic gaps in digital education, this study introduces an experiential pedagogical framework utilizing theatre and dramatization. The objectives of this paper are as follows:
- To study the structured, theatre-based pedagogical intervention that explicitly targets the emotional and ethical dimensions of cyber wellness.
- To understand a comprehensive evaluation plan designed to measure the cognitive and behavioral shifts in students before and after the intervention, addressing the critical gap in empirical cyber education research.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

CYBER RISKS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

The first category of related literature focuses on the psychological toll of digital environments, particularly the manifestation of stress and emotional exhaustion in students. Modern educational and psychological research increasingly relies on multidimensional surveys and predictive modeling to understand how environmental pressures impact emotional well-being. For instance, advanced machine learning models, including Support Vector Machines and Random Forests, have been successfully deployed to detect and forecast mental stress among college students based on extensive questionnaire datasets (Singh et al., 2024). The core idea of these diagnostic approaches is to identify the multifaceted nature of stress—including emotional well-being and academic pressure—so that institutions can mitigate these issues proactively (Singh et al., 2024). While such studies

provide powerful diagnostic tools and highlight the severity of the problem, they often lack prescriptive, student-centered pedagogical interventions, a weakness this current work seeks to address through active theatre engagement.

STUDENT ATTITUDES AND PROBLEM-SOLVING FRAMEWORKS

The second category examines how students formulate attitudes and approaches toward solving complex problems, which is highly analogous to how they navigate ethical dilemmas in cyberspace. Research into students' problem-solving attitudes across both high school and university contexts reveals significant differences between novice learners and experts (Mason & Singh, 2016; Balta et al., 2016). Studies show that while students may grasp basic procedural knowledge, they frequently struggle with meta-cognition and the deeper conceptual reasoning required for expert-level problem solving (Balta et al., 2016). Furthermore, structured instructional interventions, such as quantitative inquiry labs, have proven effective at improving the quality of students' reasoning and sensemaking by cueing specific critical thinking behaviors (Holmes et al., 2017). The strength of these frameworks lies in their structured scaffolding; however, they are often confined to STEM disciplines. This paper extends this core idea by applying structured critical thinking and meta-cognitive cueing to the realm of digital citizenship and moral reasoning.

MULTIMEDIA AND THEATRICAL INTERVENTIONS IN EDUCATION

The third category encompasses the integration of multimedia, arts, and applied theatre into educational settings to enhance engagement and comprehension. Interventions that incorporate multiple means of representation, such as incorporating dance and multimedia into astrophysics education, have demonstrated profound success

in engaging diverse student populations, including deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences (Nordhaus et al., 2020). These multimedia performances significantly increase students' enjoyment and self-reported learning rates compared to traditional passive lectures (Nordhaus et al., 2020). The core strength of theatrical pedagogy is its ability to make abstract, complex, or emotionally distant concepts intensely relatable and memorable. By building upon this premise, our work contrasts with conventional cyber safety lectures by positioning theatre as the primary vehicle for empathy and emotional regulation in digital contexts.

METHODOLOGY:

Theatre based intervention was adopted to understand the cyber wellness of students. To foster a deep, internalized understanding of cyber wellness, the researcher has proposed a structured, participatory theatre-based framework that shifts students from passive recipients of safety rules to active navigators of digital dilemmas. The framework is grounded in experiential learning theory, where students are required to physically and emotionally enact scenarios that mimic real-world online interactions. The intervention spans multiple structured sessions, progressively moving from basic role-play to complex, unscripted forum theatre where the audience can halt the performance and alter the narrative outcome.

The proposed pipeline for the theatrical intervention consists of three primary modules:

Scenario Identification: Facilitators gather anecdotes from literature and history to script relatable baseline of the drama.

Dramatization and Enactment: Students work in collaborative groups to act out these scenarios, employing improvisation to explore the emotional weight in the drama. This gives them space to detach from the cyber world for some time and utilize their time in productive way.

Reflective Debriefing: Facilitators guide post-performance discussions. Effective teacher communication plays a vital role here, as instructors must use appropriate language and metacognitive questioning to ensure the symbolic lessons of the play are translated into concrete content knowledge (Kurniawan et al., 2018).

To validate the efficacy of this approach, an evaluation plan utilizing a Quasi-Experimental Pre-test-Post-test design was administered on 50 students of teacher education program. There cyber wellness was accessed on a multiple dimensions-Cyber Wellness Scale, administered before and after the program, designed to find the digital empathy, awareness of cyber risks, and self-reported screen regulation in students. The intervention involved engaging the participants in drama and theater where they were engaged from finalization of script to execution of the drama on stage. This demonstrated a statistically significant enhancement in emotional regulation and a marked decrease in cyber space involvement leading to cyber wellbeing of students.

DISCUSSION:

The findings of the present study indicate that the theatre-based intervention had a meaningful and positive impact on students' cyber wellness. The statistically significant improvement observed in post-test scores suggests that experiential and participatory pedagogies can play a crucial role in enhancing students' digital awareness, emotional regulation, and responsible online behaviour. Unlike conventional lecture-based approaches, the use of theatre enabled learners to experience rather than merely understand the dilemmas, thereby deepening the internalization of cyber wellness concepts. The improvement in dimensions such as digital empathy and awareness of cyber risks can be attributed to the immersive nature of dramatization and enactment. This aligns with the principles of experiential learning, where knowledge is constructed through direct experience and reflection. The participatory nature of forum theatre,

in particular, empowered students to critically engage with digital and other situations and further explore alternative behavioural responses, fostering higher-order thinking and ethical decision-making.

Furthermore, the reduction in excessive cyberspace involvement and improved self-regulation highlights the effectiveness of reflective debriefing sessions. Guided discussions, supported by effective teacher communication and metacognitive questioning, allowed students to connect symbolic representations from the performance to real-life digital practices. This finding is consistent with earlier research (e.g., Kurniawan et al., 2018), which emphasizes the importance of reflective dialogue in transforming experiential activities into meaningful learning outcomes.

Another significant implication of the study is the role of collaborative learning embedded within the intervention. The process of script development, role allocation, and performance required teamwork, negotiation, and collective problem-solving. These social interactions not only strengthened peer bonding but also contributed to a shared understanding of responsible digital citizenship. The creative engagement provided an alternative and productive use of students' time, potentially reducing passive screen consumption and promoting healthier digital habits.

The study offers valuable pedagogical insights. It highlights the potential of integrating arts-based methodologies, particularly theatre, into digital literacy and cyber wellness education. For teacher educators, this approach is especially relevant, as it equips future teachers with innovative strategies to address cyber safety issues in classrooms. The findings advocate for a shift from rule-based instruction to participatory, reflective, and emotionally engaging learning environments.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY:

The integration of a theatre-based cyber wellness intervention holds substantial practical implications for modern educational curricula.

If schools shift away from standalone, lecture-based cyber safety assemblies toward embedded experiential modules, students are more likely to internalize positive digital citizenship. Furthermore, this approach highlights the critical need for specialized teacher training. Educators must be equipped not only with technological knowledge but also with the facilitation skills required to direct emotional role-plays and manage sensitive classroom dialogues effectively (Kurniawan et al., 2018). Implementing such programs requires collaboration between curriculum planners, drama educators, and school counselors to ensure the themes remain relevant to the evolving digital landscape.

LIMITATIONS:

The sample size was limited to students from a teacher education program only.

FUTURE WORK

Future research must focus on expanding the empirical foundation of experiential cyber education through long-term, longitudinal studies. By tracking students' actual online behaviors and disciplinary records over several years following the intervention, researchers can determine the true permanence of the behavioral changes induced by the theatre program. Additionally, future work should explore the integration of virtual reality (VR) and digital avatars into the theatrical framework. Combining traditional role-play with immersive VR environments could simulate the anonymity and psychological distance of the internet more accurately, providing a hybrid pedagogical tool tailored for the next generation of digital natives.

CONCLUSION

The escalation of cyber risks, including digital misconduct, online stress, and cyberbullying, demands a paradigm shift in how educational institutions approach cyber wellness. Traditional, rule-based awareness programs have consistently fallen short of instilling the deep emotional intelligence and moral reasoning required

for students to navigate the complexities of cyberspace safely. By integrating theatre-based pedagogy, educators can provide a dynamic, experiential learning environment that bridges the gap between cognitive awareness and behavioral application.

Ultimately, this proposed intervention leverages the immersive power of dramatization to cultivate empathy, critical thinking, and digital resilience. While implementation requires careful ethical consideration and resource allocation, the potential to transform students from passive internet users into responsible, psychologically healthy digital citizens is immense. The theatrical stage offers a safe, controlled sandbox for the digital age, proving that innovative artistic pedagogy remains a vital tool in modern scientific and social education. Additionally, fostering psychological well-being through artistic pedagogy may help mitigate mental stress commonly experienced by college students in digital environments (Singh et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the theatre-based intervention emerges as an effective and holistic approach to fostering cyber wellness among students. By combining cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning, it not only enhances awareness but also promotes responsible digital behaviour and psychological well-being.

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**Unsettling Entanglements:
Navigating Anthropocene Ethics and
Ecological Kinship in Charlotte McConaghy's
Migrations through Dark Ecology and
the Chthulucene**

Madhumita Majumdar

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores *Migrations* by Charlotte McConaghy as a critical examination of Anthropocene ethics through the journey of Franny Stone, a woman driven to witness the final migration of the Arctic terns. Engaging Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" and Donna Haraway's Chthulucene, the analysis reveals how the novel challenges anthropocentric frameworks, emphasizing interdependence and kinship between human and non-human life. Franny's complex relationship with the terns illustrates Morton's concept of "the mesh," where ecological awareness accepts ambiguity and interconnectedness. Haraway's Chthulucene further frames Franny's journey as an act of "response-ability," embracing vulnerability and care across species. By positioning *Migrations* within ecocritical discourse, this paper argues that the novel advocates for an ethics of bearing witness to ecological collapse, reshaping notions of agency, responsibility, and ethical action in a world irrevocably affected by human influence and inviting a deeper ecological consciousness.

Key Words: Anthropocene, Ecological ethics,
Interdependence, Dark ecology,

RESPONSE-ABILITY

The Anthropocene, a term that marks the epoch in which human activity has the dominant influence on climate and the environment and also that one that poses profound challenges as well as ethical dilemmas that reverberate across disciplines, particularly in literature and ecocriticism. As we continue to grapple with the stark realities of ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change, there remains a pressing need to reassess our ethical frameworks and understandings of interconnection in an era that is characterized by interdependence between human and non-human life. The need to interrogate and reshape ethical paradigms has become imperative, particularly as we confront the complex implications of human impact on nonhuman life. In this context, the paper would use Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2020) that navigates these pressing concerns through the protagonist, Franny Stone's quest to follow the last migration of the Arctic terns. In doing so, the novel not only raises questions of ecological ethics and interconnectedness but also aligns with Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" and Donna Haraway's "Chthulucene." These two theoretical approaches critique the linear and hierarchical human-nature dynamics, offering alternative ways to perceive ecological relationships.

This paper utilizes Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology alongside Donna Haraway's notion of the Chthulucene to examine Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations*. These theoretical frameworks illuminate to show how McConaghy's narrative challenges anthropocentric viewpoints, exposes the ethical complexities characterizing the Anthropocene, and advocates for a reimagined understanding of human responsibility within interconnected ecological systems. Through this lens, the analysis hopes to highlight how *Migrations* calls for a reconsideration of humanity's

entangled role in the ecological web, moving beyond conventional notions of environmental stewardship to embrace a more nuanced ethical awareness.

Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology responds to the ecological crises defining the Anthropocene by confronting the unsettling awareness of humanity's inseparable connection to ecological decay. Challenging the anthropocentric divide that positions humanity outside of nature, dark ecology argues for a view of humans as irrevocably woven into "dark" or "uncanny" ecological networks. This framework underscores the ethical ambiguity of the Anthropocene, highlighting the complex interdependence among all life forms, human and nonhuman.

Conversely, Donna Haraway's Chthulucene presents an alternative narrative to the Anthropocene through its advocacy for multi species sympoiesis, or "making-with." By dismantling hierarchical relationships, the Chthulucene envisions ecological kinship as foundational to sustainable survival. Haraway's approach emphasizes the significance of shared vulnerabilities and interdependence across species, fostering a multi species solidarity that prioritizes ethical, reciprocal relationships within ecological systems.

Together, dark ecology and the Chthulucene provide a critical framework for understanding *Migrations*, revealing how McConaghy's novel invites readers to confront the shadowed realities of human-nature entanglements while imagining more collaborative, ethical modes of cohabitation on Earth.

Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* exemplifies Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology through its refusal to idealize the natural world, instead presenting an intricate, ambivalent portrayal of Franny Stone's ecological journey. Franny's pursuit of the Arctic terns unfolds with a melancholic awareness of her complicity in the very processes driving extinction, echoing dark ecology's emphasis on the paradoxical entanglements of ecological attachment and harm. Rather

than offering a redemptive narrative, her journey confronts the “dark” interconnection with the Anthropocene ecological collapse, aligning with Morton’s concept of the “ecological uncanny.”

The depiction of extinction in *Migrations* invites readers to confront ecological grief and humanity’s role in environmental destruction, urging an honest engagement with loss rather than offering straightforward resolutions. Franny’s sorrow for the dying natural world remains unresolved, embodying the “darkness” of ecological interdependence. This ambivalence resonates with dark ecology’s ethical ambiguity, advocating for a recognition of ecological entanglement without expecting closure. By resisting the simplification of environmental crises or the lure of Utopian solutions, the novel implies that ethical engagement with nature demands an acceptance of the complexities and inherent shadows within ecological relationships.

Through the above discussed dark ecocritical perspective, McConaghy’s *Migrations* challenges readers to grapple with the moral ambiguity of human existence within the Anthropocene. Franny’s journey exemplifies Morton’s call to embrace ecological entanglement, confronting readers with the unsettling truth that human survival is inherently entwined with systems of environmental harm and loss, often lacking straightforward remedies. By rejecting a redemptive storyline, *Migrations* critiques anthropocentric assumptions and draws readers into a dark ecology that highlights the disturbing ethical complexity of coexistence within a destabilized ecosystem.

While Morton’s dark ecology emphasizes entanglement with ecological destruction, Haraway’s *Chthulucene* offers a vision of multi species collaboration and kinship as a pathway toward a more ethical and reciprocal existence. *Migrations* reflects the *Chthulucene*’s emphasis on “sympoiesis” through Franny’s profound connection to the Arctic terns, which transcends traditional human-nature boundaries. Her dedication to following the terns’ migration exemplifies a kinship that

acknowledges the interconnected vulnerabilities of both human and nonhuman life; hence, aligning with Haraway's advocacy for multi species "making-with."

The Chthulucene rejects anthropocentric hierarchies, thus encouraging a recognition of human-nonhuman interdependence as a basis for ethical responsibility. In *Migrations*, Franny's relationship with the terns is emblematic of this interdependence. Her journey represents an ethical commitment to bearing witness to the terns' final migration, demonstrating a respect for nonhuman life that challenges the dominant narratives of control and domination in the Anthropocene. This multi species kinship, or "compost," as Haraway would term it, proposes an ethic that values all species as integral to ecological resilience, underscoring the significance of shared responsibility for the well-being of the planet.

Haraway's Chthulucene envisions a world where humans acknowledge their place within a web of multi species relations, embracing vulnerability as a foundation for ethical coexistence. Through Franny's reverence for the terns, McConaghy's novel embodies this ethic of interconnection, inviting readers to consider an alternative vision of the future where human and nonhuman survival are viewed as interdependent. This ethic not only redefines conservation but also aligns with the Chthulucene's call to "stay with the trouble," facing ecological crises with empathy and multi species solidarity.

The themes of extinction and ecological loss in *Migrations* are deeply connected to both dark ecology and the Chthulucene's perspectives on ethical responsibility. Franny's journey to follow the terns underscores the irreversible nature of extinction, challenging anthropocentric values that prioritize human needs at the expense of nonhuman life. By portraying the terns' migration as the last of its kind, McConaghy illustrates the finality of species loss, calling attention to the ethical weight of extinction as a product of human actions.

In embracing both the ethical ambiguity of dark ecology and the interconnected kinship of the Chthulucene, *Migrations* presents a narrative that re-frames extinction as an ethical crisis requiring deeper introspection and non-anthropocentric frameworks. The Arctic terns' journey becomes a metaphor for the shared precarity of all life forms, aligning with Haraway's vision of a Chthulucene ethic that emphasizes multi species survival. This portrayal highlights the moral imperative of conservation, urging readers to move beyond mere utilitarian views of biodiversity toward an ethical responsibility that acknowledges the intrinsic value of nonhuman life.

In *Migrations*, McConaghy explores the ethical complexities of the Anthropocene, advocating for an ecological ethic that reflects both the unsettling interconnections of dark ecology and the symbiotic solidarity of the Chthulucene. The novel's emphasis on ecological kinship challenges anthropocentric narratives, proposing a vision of environmental stewardship rooted in multi species responsibility and ethical cohabitation. McConaghy's portrayal of Franny's journey as one of both ecological grief and multi species commitment suggests that an ethical response to the Anthropocene must involve embracing both the moral ambiguity and the interdependence inherent in human-nonhuman relationships.

By situating *Migrations* within the frameworks of dark ecology and the Chthulucene, McConaghy's novel contributes to the discourse on Anthropocene ethics, inviting readers to reconsider their roles within the planetary ecosystem. The novel's refusal to simplify or resolve environmental crises, coupled with its call for multi species kinship, underscores the need for an ethical paradigm shift that transcends traditional human-centered ethics. In this sense, *Migrations* serves as both a reflection on the consequences of ecological collapse and a call for a new ethic/s of coexistence that honours the complex, interconnected web of life.

Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* presents a profound exploration of Anthropocene ethics, informed by the unsettling truths of dark ecology and the collaborative possibilities of the Chthulucene. Franny Stone's journey with the Arctic terns reveals the moral ambiguity and ecological kinship central to navigating the Anthropocene, urging readers to confront both the dark realities of ecological entanglement and the potential for multi species solidarity. By merging Morton's and Haraway's theoretical frameworks, *Migrations* articulates a vision of ethical responsibility that transcends anthropocentric hierarchies. The call to reconsider traditional boundaries between the human and non-human in *Migrations* fundamentally shifts how we approach ethical questions in the Anthropocene. The novel urges readers to acknowledge that the human experience is deeply woven into a vast, interconnected ecosystem, where boundaries between species and the environment blur. This recognition challenges anthropocentric views, which have traditionally positioned humans as separate from and superior to the natural world, as capable managers or stewards of it. Instead, McConaghy's narrative portrays humans as inseparably part of a complex web of life, where every action reverberates through an ecosystem that includes non-human beings and forces.

Hence, by advocating for an "ethics of care," *Migrations* elevates the agency and intrinsic value of non-human beings, such as the Arctic terns, as crucial participants in life's fabric rather than passive entities under human dominion. In this worldview, animals, plants, and even ecological systems are seen as possessing their own forms of agency and worth, independent of human use or interpretation. Such an approach invites readers to adopt a perspective that values non-human life as essential and valuable on its own terms, fostering a more inclusive ethical framework that treats all beings as interconnected co-participants in the ecosystem.

Migrations presents an eco-dystopian vision of a future marked by environmental devastation, where climate change and habitat destruction have led to the extinction of countless species. This

setting aligns with key elements of the Anthropocene, notably its global ecological consequences and the accelerated rates of extinction attributed to human activity. McConaghy's portrayal of a world nearing ecological collapse underscores the urgency of reevaluating ethical responsibilities toward the environment, highlighting the need for a moral awakening to counteract the anthropocentric impacts.

The extinction crisis depicted in *Migrations* brings to the fore the moral implications of species loss in the Anthropocene. McConaghy's representation of the Arctic terns' migration as the last of its kind symbolizes the irrevocable impact of human actions on biodiversity. This portrayal resonates with scientific discourse on the Anthropocene's sixth mass extinction, raising critical questions about the ethics of conservation and human responsibilities toward endangered species.

In dramatizing the loss of biodiversity, McConaghy underscores the need for conservation as an ethical imperative. The Arctic terns' journey serves as a narrative device to explore the importance of preserving species and ecosystems as a moral priority, particularly in an era where human consumption and expansion threaten ecological stability. By illustrating the loss of inter-species relationships, *Migrations* highlights the ethical ramifications of extinction, emphasizing the need for conservation efforts that transcend utilitarian considerations and prioritize the preservation of ecological integrity.

The concept of conservation is central to the moral framework in *Migrations*, depicted not only as a strategic response to environmental threats but as a profound ethical commitment to ecological preservation. Franny's dedication to following the terns embodies a form of conservationist empathy, an ethic that aligns with philosopher Val Plumwood's concept of "ecological kinship." Plumwood advocates for an ethical model that transcends individualism, promoting an awareness of the interconnectedness of all living beings as necessary to confront the ethical challenges of the Anthropocene.

Through Franny's journey, McConaghy portrays conservation as an obligation rooted in the recognition of ecological interconnections. This approach frames conservation not merely as a reactive measure but as a proactive commitment to fostering ecological resilience and honouring the complex relationships that sustain life on Earth. In presenting conservation as an ethical priority, McConaghy's novel reinforces the moral necessity of environmental stewardship and challenges readers to adopt a conservation ethic that reflects a deep respect for nonhuman life.

The call to reconsider traditional boundaries between the human and non-human in *Migrations* fundamentally shifts how we approach ethical questions in the Anthropocene. The novel urges readers to acknowledge that the human experience is deeply woven into a vast, interconnected ecosystem, where boundaries between species and the environment blur. This recognition challenges anthropocentric views, which have traditionally positioned humans as separate from and superior to the natural world, as capable managers or stewards of it. Instead, McConaghy's narrative portrays humans as inseparably part of a complex web of life, where every action reverberates through an ecosystem that includes non-human beings and forces.

Drawing on Bruno Latour's concept of the "Gaia hypothesis," which conceptualizes the Earth as a dynamic, self-regulating system that includes but is not reducible to human agency, *Migrations* invites us to reconsider what it means to act ethically in a world where human and non-human forces are inextricably linked. Latour's critique of the Anthropocene narrative, which he argues often reaffirms human exceptionalism by positioning humans as the managers or stewards of the Earth, resonates with the novel's depiction of Franny's ambivalent relationship to her own agency. Her journey is not about managing or controlling the natural world but about finding a way to live ethically and responsibly within a world that is both profoundly affected by and resistant to human intervention.

The novel's engagement with Anthropocene ethics, then, is not about offering solutions or resolutions to the ecological crisis but about embracing the uncertainties and ambiguities that characterize our current moment. It suggests that ethical action in the Anthropocene involves more than simply reducing harm or mitigating impact; it requires a fundamental rethinking of our relationship to the more-than-human world, an acceptance of our entanglement with forces and entities that we cannot fully know or control, and a commitment to a form of response-ability that acknowledges the limits of our knowledge and the complexity of our interconnections.

Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* offers a powerful reflection on Anthropocene ethics, underscoring the urgency of recognizing humanity's ecological responsibility toward the nonhuman world. Franny Stone's journey embodies the ethical challenges of the Anthropocene, highlighting the moral imperatives of conservation, empathy, and accountability in addressing the environmental crises of our time. McConaghy's narrative serves as a call to adopt an ethical framework grounded in ecological kinship, advocating for a vision of conservation that respects and values the intrinsic worth of nonhuman life.

In *Migrations*, McConaghy's emphasis on witnessing, rather than controlling or preserving nature, underscores a profound ethical stance—one that embodies the idea of "response-ability" as posited by Donna Haraway. This notion of response-ability shifts the ethical framework from one of dominance and management to one of participation, humility, and accountability. Instead of positioning humans as stewards or managers of the Earth, this perspective recasts humanity as active participants within a larger ecological matrix, embedded in the ebb and flow of inter species relationships and ecological processes. Bearing witness, in this context, becomes a form of ethical action that does not aim to dominate or preserve in traditional senses but to acknowledge and respond to the ecological losses and transformations around us. This act of witnessing is imbued

with a sense of shared vulnerability and collective responsibility, urging a view of the world not as a resource to be used or controlled but as a dynamic and fragile web of life with which we are interconnected.

The text compels us to reconsider the traditional boundaries that separate the human from the non-human, urging an understanding of the intricate web of relationships that define our existence. In doing so, it challenges anthropocentric paradigms that prioritize human agency above all else, advocating instead for an ethics of care that recognizes the intrinsic value and agency of non-human beings. McConaghy's exploration of ecological dependency prompts a rethinking of what it means to be ethical in a world characterized by complexity and ambiguity, where our actions are not merely individual choices but part of a larger, entangled ecosystem of life.

In doing so, *Migrations* situates itself within a broader discourse in environmental literature that seeks to articulate new ways of thinking, being, and acting in a world rapidly changing due to anthropogenic forces. McConaghy's work urges readers to embrace the complexities of ecological entanglement and calls for an ethical orientation that respect diversity of life. This approach is a deliberate rejection of simplistic or anthropocentric perspectives that separate humanity from the natural world, advocating instead for an inclusive ethical imagination that is expansive, nuanced, and deeply attuned and sustaining aspects of life on Earth.

This stance is particularly crucial as we confront the unprecedented challenges of the Anthropocene, where human actions have led to climate change, habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and a cascade of ecological crises. By embracing an ethic of response-ability, *Migrations* becomes a testament to the urgency of collective action and solidarity. It calls upon readers to recognize that the crises we face are not isolated events but symptoms of a deeper disruption in our relationship with the environment, driven by anthropocentric attitudes and practices that neglect the intrinsic value of non-human life. This perspective

demands that we rethink our ethical frameworks to address the fact how all life forms are connected and the shared responsibilities that come with such interdependence.

Ultimately, *Migrations* resonates as a poignant call to action—a reminder that our collective future hinges upon the ethical choices we make within this intricate, fragile world. In engaging in such ethical action as a participatory and relational practice, the novel compels us to cultivate a sensibility that is sensitive to the complexities of ecological systems and the myriad forms of life they support. As we navigate the uncertainties of the Anthropocene, *Migrations* stands as a powerful literary expression of the need for an ethical imagination that is inclusive, adaptive, and oriented toward a deep recognition of our entanglements with the more-than-human world. Through its portrayal of ecological grief, interspecies kinship, and an ethic of care, *Migrations* calls us to engage meaningfully and responsibly with the web of life that sustains us all, fostering a vision of solidarity that is essential to navigating and responding to the ecological challenges of our time.

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Badal Sircar and the Theosophical Society of Bengal: A Cross-Cultural Relation

Tapu Biswas

ABSTRACT:

This article examines the significant cross-cultural relationship between Badal Sircar's revolutionary theatrical practice and the Bengal Theosophical Society in Kolkata. It argues that the Theosophical Society was not merely a physical venue for the performances of Sircar's *Satabdi* theatre group, but also a crucial cultural and intellectual space in the evolution of his Third Theatre. The study first traces the historical development of the Theosophical Society in Bengal, emphasizing its ideals of universal brotherhood, comparative religious inquiry, human service, spiritual self-realization, and the recovery of Eastern philosophical traditions. These principles are then examined alongside Sircar's evolving theatrical philosophy, particularly his rejection of the proscenium stage, commercialized theatre, and hierarchical distinctions between performer and spectator. After 1971, Sircar's search for an accessible, economical, and participatory theatrical form found an ideal environment in the modest hall of the Theosophical Society near College Square. Its flat, flexible, and intimate space enabled *Satabdi* to experiment with audience configuration, collective acting, physical theatre, mime, minimalism, and voluntary "hat collection" rather than conventional ticketing. Through productions including *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas*, *Hattamalar Opore*, *Captain Hurrah*, *Gondi*, *Basi Khabar*, *Sniri*, *Sana Baurir Kothokota*, *Janmabhumi*

Aaj, Bhoma, Michhil, and Trinsha Shatabdi, the hall became a laboratory for political, social, humanistic, and existential theatre. The article further explores the philosophical affinity between the Theosophical ideas of human unity, service, karma, and inner inquiry and Sircar's concern with social justice, collective consciousness, direct human communication, and existential questioning. Finally, through *Evam Indrajit*, the study identifies a deeper intellectual bridge between Theosophical self-inquiry and Sircar's interrogation of identity, alienation, and the meaning of existence. The article concludes that the Bengal Theosophical Society played a distinctive role in enabling the aesthetic, economic, spatial, and philosophical foundations of Third Theatre, making it an important site in the history of modern Bengali alternative theatre.

Keywords: Badal Sircar; Third Theatre; Theosophical Society; Satabdi; Bengali Theatre; Cross-Culturalism; Alternative Theatre; *Evam Indrajit*

In the history of modern Bengali drama, Badal Sircar (1925-2011) is a name that struck at the roots of conventional theatrical practices and gave birth to a completely new genre. Bringing theatre out of the magical world of the proscenium stage, he made it stand on the harsh ground of reality, face to face with the audience. An inseparable part of his epoch-making artistic journey is the Theosophical Society of Kolkata. This place was not merely a performance space, rather it was the sacred laboratory of Badal Sircar's dream, the 'Third Theatre'. Breaking the barriers of conventional stages, lighting, makeup, and huge budgets, the 'Satabdi' theatre group gave birth to such plays in the empty room of the Theosophical Society that changed the history of Indian theatre forever.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the 'Theosophical Society' was one of the main catalysts of the wind of renaissance and spiritual revival that began blowing in India. This international

organization made its debut in 1875 in New York, America, holding the hands of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Its main objective was to build a universal brotherhood in the name of God and to re-evaluate ancient Eastern philosophies. The wave of this movement reached India in 1879. Via Bombay, its international headquarters was established in Madras (present-day Chennai). In this broader context, the “Bengal Theosophical Society” was established in Kolkata in 1882, which became an important meeting place for the intellectuals and spiritual thinkers of Bengal. In India, especially in Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj had built an intense movement against various superstitions of Hinduism in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, Christian missionaries were also extensively engaged in conversion. At such a critical juncture, the Theosophical Society highly praised ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and, by highlighting their scientific and spiritual foundations, gave birth to a new self-confidence among educated Indians. Madame Blavatsky or Colonel Olcott never opposed Indian religions; rather, they criticized Christian missionaries. For this reason, Theosophy very quickly gained popularity among Indians, especially among educated Bengali society.

In 1882, the building and place of worship of the Bengal Theosophical Society were established in the area adjacent to College Square in Kolkata (currently 4B, Bankim Chatterjee Street). Initially, the number of members of this society was 110. The names of many renowned and intellectual people of Bengal are associated with the establishment of the Bengal Theosophical Society. Among them, specifically notable are:

- **Mohini Mohun Chatterji:** He was a renowned lawyer and spiritual thinker. He was elected a Charter Member of this institution in 1882. He also played an important role in the propagation of Theosophy in Europe.

- **Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore:** He was a famous musician and scholar. He too was elected a Fellow of this Society in 1882.
- **Hirendranath Datta:** Famous philosopher and writer. A founder of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, he was its Secretary for many years and was President in 1932. Datta was also President of Bengal Theosophical Society, Vice-President of International Theosophical Society, and Founder-Secretary of National Council of Education, Bengal.
- **Dr. G. N. Chakravarti:** Gained international recognition as an Indian scholar and lecturer on Hinduism and Theosophy, notably speaking at the World's Parliament of Religions during the 1893 Chicago World's Fair alongside figures like Swami Vivekananda.
- **Upendranath Basu:** A Hindu theosophist who, together with Bertram Keithley, became the first General Secretary of the Indian Section. He joined the Theosophical Society in 1884 and his name is mentioned in the first report of the Kāshī Tattva Sabhā Lodge in Banaras where he was one of the founders with Bhagavan Das as Librarian.
- **Swarnakumari Devi:** The eldest sister of Rabindranath Tagore and a renowned writer. Her inclusion proves that this Society accepted women equally.

The participation of these eminent people proves that the Bengal Theosophical Society was not merely a religious organization, but rather it was one of the centres of Bengal's intellectual awakening. The objectives of the Bengal Theosophical Society were determined in alignment with the principles of the main Theosophical Society. In the social and cultural context of contemporary Bengal, these objectives were extremely significant. The most sacred and primary objective of the Society was to build a universal brotherhood among mankind, forgetting the differences of caste, religion, colour, or social status. They believed that all humans are part of one supreme being, therefore showing love and compassion towards all is the true religion.

When a section of contemporary educated Bengali society, under the influence of Western education, was suffering from an inferiority complex regarding their ancient heritage, the Theosophical Society made efforts to prove the depth and greatness of Vedanta, the Upanishads, and Buddhist philosophy. They wanted to prove that the spiritual knowledge of the East was in no way inferior to the science of the West. Theosophy was not limited merely to theoretical knowledge. H. P. Blavatsky mentioned in her book 'The Key to Theosophy' that one of the main goals of Theosophy is to eradicate all forms of human suffering—physical and moral. The members of the Bengal Theosophical Society believed that true spiritual progress is not possible without devoting oneself to the service of mankind. The great Masters of Theosophy had clearly stated that those who strive only for their own personal spiritual liberation are not true Theosophists; rather, those who are ready to sacrifice their own interests for the greater good of humanity are the ones entitled to attain true knowledge.

Since its establishment, the Bengal Theosophical Society began to spread very rapidly to various parts of Bengal. Apart from the headquarters in Kolkata, its branches expanded to various districts of Bengal, especially in North Bengal. Searching through history, it is seen that the conference of the 'All Bengal Theosophical Society' was held in Jalpaiguri town in 1928. This proves that beyond Kolkata, the influence of Theosophy was quite strong in North Bengal districts in West Bengal like Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, and Malda. At a time when other organizations like the Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, or Gaudiya Math were also expanding their branches in North Bengal, the Theosophical Society also joined that wave of spiritual and social reconstruction.

After the death of Madame Blavatsky, Dr. Annie Besant became the international president of the Theosophical Society. Under her leadership, the Theosophical movement in India gained a new dimension. She was not only a spiritual leader but also a freedom

fighter. Annie Besant had a tremendous impact on the activities of the Bengal Theosophical Society as well. She had established the 'Home Rule League' and was also elected as the president of the National Congress. National leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru were also attracted to Theosophy in their early lives. During Annie Besant's time, the Theosophical Society did not remain confined only to spiritual practices, but indirectly helped in the awakening of political and nationalistic consciousness among Indians. The Bengal Theosophical Society undertook initiatives to publish various journals and books to propagate their ideology. A rich library was built in the College Street building, which possessed a collection of rare books on Eastern and Western philosophy, theology, and science. This library was one of the main attractions for the knowledge-thirsty people of contemporary Kolkata.

There is no way to deny the contribution of the Theosophical Society to the Bengal Renaissance. Where social reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar primarily focused on eradicating evil social customs (like Satidaha Pratha, widow remarriage, etc.), the Theosophical Society provided a philosophical and psychological foundation there. First, they confidently presented the underlying philosophy of Hinduism before Western rationalism. Second, the concept of 'Universal Brotherhood' helped the educated society of Bengal to rise above narrow nationalism or religious bigotry and form an international and liberal outlook. Third, by emphasizing the comparative study of various religions (such as Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian), the Theosophical Society created a very tolerant environment in Bengal.

An important aspect of the Bengal Theosophical Society was their concept regarding 'Karma'. According to Theosophical literature, all circumstances are the result of the power of Karma, which works to bring about something good in every moment and every place. This is a Divine Law. Theosophists believed that whenever we obstruct or resist understanding this law of Karma, pain or suffering is created

within us. Doing something in every moment and every situation that is beneficial for the life around us—this is true Theosophy or Brahmailidya. This philosophy inspired the members of the Society towards philanthropic works.

Badal Sircar, in his memoir 'Third Theatre', has given a very vivid description of the Bengal Theosophical Society's (then Theosophical Society of India Bengal Federation) building and the experience of practicing theatre there. He did not just discuss the philosophy of the Society there, rather he highlighted the environment of the building, the struggle of performing plays, and the emotional connection of his group with that place. This is not merely a description of a theatre stage; it is part of the history of the evolution of his Third Theatre, the struggle of theatrical practice, and the creation of an alternative cultural space.

In 1967, Badal Sircar established his theatre group 'Satabdi'. In the early days, Satabdi also performed plays on the proscenium stage. Plays like *Evam Indrajit* (1963), *Baki Itihas* (1965), and *Pagla Ghora* (1967) established him as a successful playwright of the proscenium theatre. But after 1971, a radical change began to occur in Badal Sircar's thoughts. He gradually realized that this proscenium theatre, built in imitation of the West, had actually become a medium of entertainment for a handful of middle and upper-class people in the city. Its huge production costs, ticket system, use of lights, makeup, and stage design—all these were alienating theatre from common people, especially the working class and rural masses. Theatre had turned into a commodity that only wealthy audiences could afford. From this deep sense of crisis, his groundbreaking concept of the 'Third Theatre' was born. He wanted to step out of the magical world of the proscenium stage and reach the people directly. During this time, he started working with the concept of 'Courtyard Theatre'. He needed a space that was not a conventional theatre stage, where the audience and the actor would be on the same level, where the smell of the actor's sweat and breath would touch the audience, and the

actor could directly read the language of the eyes of the audiences. In search of this alternative space, the Satabdi group discovered the hall room of the Bengal Theosophical Society adjacent to College Square in Kolkata. Badal Sircar wrote that this building, situated amidst the hustle and bustle of College Square, was very old and historic. It had been under the possession of the Theosophical Society for many years. There was a kind of silence and an atmosphere of history in the environment of the building, which was completely different from the environment of an ordinary theatre hall. This unpretentious room of the Theosophical Society became the birthplace of the Third Theatre. It was not a theatre stage, but an ordinary meeting room or hall. And this 'stagelessness' appeared as the greatest blessing to Badal Sircar. The physical structure of this hall room directly influenced the creation of the grammar of the Third Theatre. The room was flat; there was no raised platform. There were ordinary benches or durries for the audience to sit on. Badal Sircar arranged this Empty Space in his own way.

It was in this room that he first discarded conventional 'frontal acting' (acting facing forward). The audience would sit around the room, sometimes in a 'U' shape, sometimes in a circle. And the actors would perform in the empty space in the middle and in the aisles among the audience. This flat floor of the Theosophical Society completely erased the height and psychological distance between the actor and the audience. Theatre no longer remained a distant magical spectacle; it became a living, rough, real experience right before the eyes.

A very important aspect of the Third Theatre is its economic structure. Badal Sircar believed that if theatre was to be saved from becoming a commodity, the ticket system had to be abolished. Theatre should be like a fundamental human right, just like people roaming in a park or reading books in a library. But doing regular plays in Kolkata, the huge rent of proscenium halls is impossible to cover without selling tickets. This is where the Bengal Theosophical Society played the role of a saviour. The rent of this hall room was extremely nominal, which

could be met with the personal subscriptions of the members of the Satabdi group. As a result, Badal Sircar could courageously abolish the ticket system and introduce the 'Hat Collection' or voluntary donation system. At the end of the play, a bag or box was taken to the audience; whoever had the means or desire would give that much money; even if someone did not give, there was no objection. Due to the affordable rent of the Theosophical Society, this economic model of 'Free Theatre' or open theatre of the Third Theatre could be successfully implemented. Satabdi regularly performed plays here every Friday and Saturday.

Badal Sircar stated that in early 1976, they started regular weekly performances in this hall. Earlier, due to the Emergency (1975), the police had stopped their theatrical performances in parks or open spaces, as a result of which they were looking for such an indoor or enclosed space. In his reminiscences, he mentioned that on July 6, 1979, the first performance of Satabdi's famous play *Basi Khabar* took place in this very room of the Theosophical Society, which was the final culmination of a year-long workshop and preparation. Besides, plays like *Gondi* (1978) (an adaptation of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) and *Bhoma* (1975) or *Spartacus* (1972) were also staged in this room. To Badal Sircar, this hall was not just an auditorium, it was a vital workshop place for his Third Theatre movement. In this small room of the Theosophical Society, Badal Sircar and his group Satabdi staged such plays that are milestones in Bengali dramatic literature.

Under the direction of Badal Sircar and the production of Satabdi, the first play staged at the Bengal Theosophical Society Hall was *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas* (1976). It was staged on December 17, 1976. In that 58-foot long and 24-foot wide hall room of the Theosophical Society, there was no raised stage, wings, drop scene, or spotlight arrangement. All around, there were cold almirahs of old books on Theosophy and faded portraits of spiritual seekers, and in the middle, the audience sat on mats or durries spread on the floor. During the staging of the play *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas*,

the seating arrangement for the audience was designed in such a way that the entire hall turned into a performance space and the audience positioned themselves right at the centre of the play. The main structure of this play was built in the likeness of a classroom. The arrival of the British East India Company, colonial rule, and the history of exploitation by capitalists in post-independence India—how it is taught to common people in an ‘easily readable’ or easily understandable way—is the main theme of this play. In that large and solemn room of the Theosophical Society, the actors appeared in the role of ‘teachers’, and the present audience indirectly became the ‘students’ of that classroom or the exploited common subjects. As the play proceeded under the light of ordinary tube lights in the room, the invisible Fourth Wall of the proscenium was completely shattered. The actors walked around among the audience, looking straight into their eyes, and delivered sharp, sarcastic, and piercing dialogues. According to the style of the Third Theatre, there were no heavy sets or props in this play either. The actors’ bodies and voices were the main tools of performance. Through the extraordinary use of the chorus, the actors used their own bodies to create sometimes the East India Company’s merchant ships, sometimes the trains built by the British, wheels of machines, and sometimes the cruel grinding mill of exploitation. In a specific part of the play, it is shown how native capitalists and politicians maintain that same structure of exploitation after the departure of the British masters. To convey this political transition, the actors would run at intense speed from one end of the Theosophical Society hall to the other. Through physical gestures and the intense pronunciation of the chorus, this transfer of power was portrayed before the audience’s eyes.

Alongside intensely harsh, realistic, and directly political plays like *Bhoma* (1975), *Michhil* (1978), or *Basi Khabar* (1978), the Satabdi theatre group also staged certain plays in the hall room of the Bengal Theosophical Society that were wrapped in sharp social criticism under the guise of fairy tales. One such extraordinary and

timeless play is *Hattamalar Opare* (1977), which was first staged on July 22, 1977. Amidst the enclosed, dusty, and ancient environment of those four walls of the Theosophical Society, the construction of a completely imaginary, exploitation-free, and moneyless utopian or ideal society was an unprecedented event in the practice of Bengali alternative theatre.

The narrative of the play *Hattamalar Opare* revolves around two petty thieves named Kenaram and Becharam. Chased by people after stealing, they jump into a fast-flowing river and, floating along, reach a strange land where there is no currency. There, everyone works according to their capacity and with joy, and collects necessary items from shops for free. Nobody buys or sells anything, so there is no concept of theft or private property there. This play is a sharp yet humorous slap against the money-centricity and profit-greedy structure of capitalist society.

Creating a fantasy world or a fairy tale kingdom in such a solemn environment—surrounded by almirahs of old books and faded portraits of veteran seekers of Theosophy in the hall room of the Theosophical Society—was not an easy task at all. To perform such a play on a conventional proscenium stage would require huge sets, colourful lights, and magical background scores. But Badal Sircar, using the philosophy of the Third Theatre, proved that imagination does not require any specific material medium. In the empty space in the middle of the audience sitting in a circle on mats spread on the floor, the markets, gardens, and streets of that strange country came alive. It felt as if the audience themselves became ordinary citizens of that imaginary country. Following the characteristics of the Third Theatre, an extraordinary application of Physical Acting and Pantomime or mime was seen in the staging of this play. Without any props or equipment, the actors created the fast-flowing river, the riverbanks, and even the pleasant environment of that strange land beyond Hattamala through their bodies, voices, and gestures.

When Kenaram and Becharam went to a shop in that country and tried to steal food or were surprised to get things without paying money, the actors flawlessly brought those scenes to life through physical expressions. Scenes of picking up an imaginary rasgulla from thin air and eating it, wearing imaginary clothes, or lifting imaginary heavy objects became so lively under the light of ordinary white tube lights of the Theosophical Society that the audience unknowingly became engrossed in the magic of that imaginary world. The impeccable timing and physical flexibility of the actors wove an invisible web of magic before the eyes of the audience. In the intimate environment of the Theosophical Society, the distance between the audience and the actors was only a few inches. The actors, wearing ordinary clothes without makeup, delivered their dialogues looking straight into the eyes of the audience. The intense comedy and satire of the play '*Hattamalar Opare*' initially made the audience laugh, but the very next moment made them think deeply. When the thieves Kenaram and Becharam failed and were defeated trying to explain the concept of money to the people of that country, the urban middle-class audience sitting on the floor actually realized the absurdity of their own money-dependent society and greed anew. Since the lights in the room were not turned off, the actors could directly see the philosophical curiosity that emerged on the faces of the audience between the gaps of laughter, and adjusted the scale of their acting accordingly. At the end of the play, when Kenaram and Becharam realized their mistake and mingled in the mainstream of that society (i.e., labour), a strange mental purification or Catharsis occurred in the minds of the audience as well.

In Badal Sircar's theatrical life, *Captain Hurrah* (1977), is a particularly significant production. It is originally a play written by playwright Mohit Chattopadhyay, the dramatization and direction of which Badal Sircar creatively applied using the philosophy of his Third Theatre. The first staging of the play was on November 22, 1977, at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata, produced by the 'Satabdi'

theatre group. The subject matter of the play 'Captain Hurrah' mainly revolves around power-hungry leadership and the crisis of human values. Centring on the character of a military leader, the arrogance of power, the cruelty of war, and the plight of ordinary people have been presented in a symbolic language in the play. Badal Sircar presented this play not merely as a political play, but as an artistic expression of anti-war, humanistic statements. Although the central character of the play, 'Captain Hurrah', is a symbol of individual leadership, the true protagonists of the play are the ordinary people whose lives are repeatedly devastated in the clash of power.

In the play *Captain Hurrah*, the extraordinary physical acting and the application of an unconventional theatrical style by the cast mesmerized the audience. In the character of the Captain, the actor's body language is highly aggressive and somewhat grotesque. The audience seeing from very close the Captain's mad-like gaze, the swelling veins on his neck, and the flexing of muscles creates a terrible sense of dread. On the other hand, the physical gestures of the exploited characters are extremely mechanical. They are followers of orders like spineless robots. The physical contrast between these two classes became highly prominent on the small stage of the Theosophical Society.

On May 12, 1978, *Gondi* was staged, which was an adaptation of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The main theme of the play *Gondi* is true guardianship and the right to property. Who is the true mother of a child—the one who gave birth to it but abandoned it and fled during danger, or the one who raised and nurtured it to grow up; Brecht had highlighted this eternal dialectical conflict in his play. Badal Sircar blended that conflict with the contemporary social and political reality of Bengal and gave it a new form using the format of the Third Theatre. There were no huge or expensive sets in this play. The entire play was performed under the ordinary tube lights of the Theosophical Society. No magical spotlights or background music were used that could sway the audience with emotion. Instead, Badal

Sircar merged Brecht's 'Alienation Effect' with the 'Physical Acting' of the Third Theatre to create an incredible theatrical language. Since there were almost no sets or props to speak of, the actors' bodies became the primary tools for creating the scenery. Through the use of the chorus, the actors sometimes depicted a river, sometimes a mountain, or sometimes the horrors of war. In the final scene of the play, when a circle (a circle drawn with chalk) is drawn on the ground to resolve the conflict between the two mothers over the child, it felt as if the audience at the Theosophical Society had been seated as judges with the verdict placed before them. In conventional theatre, the audience sits safely in the dark; but in the lit room of the Theosophical Society, the audience could clearly see each other's faces and the expressions of the actors. This environment threw the audience into an intense psychological discomfort and forced them to question their own class positions.

In the turbulent political environment of the seventies, when the city of Kolkata was witnessing the Naxalite movement and state repression, the staging of a play like '*Gondi*' in a historic and ancient building like the Theosophical Society was a kind of cultural resistance. This play proved that huge amounts of money are not needed to do theatre; what is needed is only honest intention and a social perspective. The staging of the play *Gondi* in the room of the Bengal Theosophical Society was not just a successful theatrical performance; it was a flawless practical application of the Aesthetics of Third Theatre.

It was in this historic room of the Bengal Theosophical Society that on July 6, 1979, Badal Sircar's another groundbreaking, sharp, and politically intense play *Basi Khabar* (Stale News) was staged for the first time. After a long year of relentless workshop and intense preparation, this play was born, the staging of which established a new milestone in the history of Bengali alternative theatre. The main theme of the play '*Basi Khabar*' is the mental apathy of the urban educated middle class and the harshness of contemporary political and social reality.

The heartbreaking news of exploitation, murder, injustice, and state terrorism against marginalized people that we read in the newspaper every morning becomes stale news or meaningless to us the very next day. We read that news while having tea, express a little regret, and then return to our safe lives. In this play, Badal Sircar drew a parallel between the historical backdrop of the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 and the picture of the killing of Naxalite youths and police torture in the turbulent political turmoil of Kolkata in the seventies. This intense political commentary in the closed space of the Theosophical Society created a strange sense of guilt and psychological pressure in the minds of the audience.

The most notable aspect of the staging of 'Basi Khabar' was its process of Collective Creation. Badal Sircar wrote that this play was not the creation of a single playwright in the conventional sense, rather it was built over almost a year through the joint thinking, discussion, practice, and spontaneous creation of the actors, director, and members of the theatre group. In his opinion, this was the first full-fledged play of the Satabdi group which was built entirely on the basis of collective creation. In terms of staging, *Basi Khabar* did not follow the conventions of traditional proscenium theatre. Heavy stage setups, expensive lights, or glamorous costumes were not used here. The bodies of the actors, voices, rhythmic walking, and group formations turned into the main mediums of expression of the play.

Among the important plays written in the latter phase of Badal Sircar's theatrical life, *Sniri* (Staircase) is particularly notable. The play was written in 1984, and its first staging took place on February 1, 1985, at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata under the production of the 'Satabdi' theatre group. The play *Sniri* is essentially a sharp criticism of the limitless ambition of human life, socio-economic inequality, and the rat race. The 'Sniri' here is a symbol of social stratification and reaching the corridors of power. Someone is desperate to climb up that staircase, while someone else is constantly terrified of the fear of falling down from above. Each character in the play is constantly struggling

to maintain their position on each step of this imaginary staircase. When this play was performed in a small space like the Theosophical Society, this exhaustion of climbing the stairs and the fear of falling was transmitted to the audience on a psychological level as well. The insecurity of middle-class life and the helplessness of people crushed under the grinding wheel of modern capitalism have been portrayed very skilfully through the sharp dialogues and silence of the play. In a particular scene of the play, a face-to-face clash between two men on the exact middle step of the stairs is seen. One is a young man in whose eyes lies extreme ambition and who wants to reach the top of the stairs at any cost; the other is an older man who is exhausted by the hard work of a long life and is struggling just to hold onto his current position. This desperate fight to occupy just one step of the staircase between these two generations is highly metaphorical. When this scene was performed on the small stage of the Theosophical Society, the aggressive breathing of the actors and the tension of their muscles gave birth to a strange discomfort among the audience, which is a naked reflection of social reality.

The grammar of acting in intimate theatre is quite different from that of an ordinary Proscenium stage. Here there is no place for loud dialogue delivery or melodramatic gestures. The director of the play *Sniri* managed this aspect very meticulously. The actors' body language or physical language and the subtle modulation of their voices were praiseworthy. While climbing the stairs, the actors' panting, the disgust showing on their faces, or sudden excitement—all of it was so vivid that the audience forgot for a moment that they were watching an act. The psychological conflict of each character and the dirty competition to surpass one another came alive through the actors' highly mature and sensitive acting.

The soul of any play is its light and sound. Although there was no opportunity to set up a very large lighting arrangement on the stage of the Theosophical Society, the director has left a great example of 'Minimalism' or a sense of proportion here. In *Sniri*, the

play of light and shadow has been used in a symbolic sense. When a bright spotlight falls on the upper steps of the staircase, the lower steps remain covered in darkness—which directly indicates the class inequality of society. Alongside, in the case of background music as well, silence has been used as a powerful musical instrument. Without playing any continuous music, merely the sound of heavy shoes on the wooden stairs, a deep sigh, or a suddenly ringing sharp tune evoked a strange thrill down the spines of the audience. This measured use of sound multiplied the gravity of the play several times.

In the history of Badal Sircar's theatrical journey, *Sana Baurir Kothokota* is an important political and humanistic play. It is a creation of the mature phase of his Third Theatre philosophy, where the life struggles, exploitation, social inequality, and the spirit of resistance of marginalized people have been expressed through theatrical language. The first staging of the play was on August 30, 1985, at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata, produced by the 'Satabdi' theatre group. The direction of the play was given by Bishakha Sircar, which is a notable event in the history of Badal Sircar's theatre group. The main subject matter of the play '*Sana Baurir Kothokota*' is the life of people from a so-called subaltern or untouchable class of Rarh Bengal. Sana Bauri is not merely a character here, rather he is the representative of a large community that has been exploited, oppressed, and neglected for ages. In every layer of the play, the harsh reality of rural India has emerged, where marginalized people like Sana are crushed in the cruel grinding mill of casteism, untouchability, and the moneylending system. The continuous and unequal fight of a man standing amidst stomach hunger and social indignity just to survive has been portrayed by the playwright with immense empathy, yet very realistically without taking shelter of any kind of exaggeration or melodrama.

In the presentation of this play on the stage of the Theosophical Society, the philosophy of the Third Theatre is clearly reflected. Like conventional theatre, there was no reliance on expensive

stage decorations, realistic sets, or complex lighting designs here. Instead, the empty stage, a few necessary props, the actors' physical arrangements, rhythmic walking, and the multidimensional use of voices created the atmosphere of the play. Sometimes the bodies of the actors themselves became symbols of a village, a path, a prison, or a public gathering. This metaphorical presentation elevated the play beyond the limits of reality and gave it a universal meaning.

In the direction of the play, Bishakha Sircar's role is particularly noteworthy. Even while following Badal Sircar's theatrical philosophy, she maintained her own restraint and pace in acting design. Through group acting, chorus-like dialogue, collective body language, and rhythmic movements, she made the political message of the play even stronger. Instead of individual-dependent acting, the collective acting style received special importance here, which is one of the fundamental features of the Third Theatre.

The seating arrangement of the Theosophical Society Hall also played a special role in the staging of the play. The distance between the audience and the actors was extremely minimal. As a result, the audience did not merely watch the play; they seemingly became a part of the flow of events in the play. Due to the absence of a raised proscenium stage or fixed division, the dialogue, body language, and emotion reached the audience directly. According to Badal Sircar, this direct human connection is the true power of a play. In the staging of *Sana Baurir Kothokota*, that philosophy was successfully realized. The language of the play was simple, but profoundly significant. Folk language, regional pronunciation, songs, rhymes, and collective utterances connected the play with the experiences of common people. The political message of the play was never limited to direct sloganeering; rather, it was expressed through the life struggles, relationships, and everyday experiences of the characters. For this reason, the play is evaluated simultaneously as a political, social, and humanistic play. The biggest achievement of this play was its direct psychological interaction with the audience. Sitting in a place like

the Theosophical Society, when Sana Bauri looks into the eyes of the audience and tells the stories of his agony, the audience too begins to suffer from a kind of guilt as silent partners in this exploitation. Sana's questions are not directed only at the other characters on the stage, but rather they seem to be thrown directly at the modern civil society sitting in the front rows.

An ultimate example of a sense of proportion in the field of lighting was set in this play. Even in the dim light of the Theosophical Society, the director created a wonderful play of light and shadow. A type of sharp white light was used during the presence of the exploiter class, while during moments of Sana's loneliness or despair, plunging most of the stage into darkness and using only a yellow spotlight wonderfully brought out the mental state of the character. Regarding background music, discarding the excess of instrumental music, the scattered use of folk musical instruments like dhamsa or madal made the dramatic moments even sharper. The most praiseworthy was the use of 'silence'. When Sana's sigh or the sound of his bare feet on the ground echoes through the entire hall room, it sends a strange shiver down the spines of the audience.

Badal Sircar's play *Janmabhumi Aaj* was staged at the Theosophical Society Hall as one of the most notable productions of the 'Satabdi' theatre group. The first staging of the play was on May 23, 1986. Among the political and socially conscious plays of Badal Sircar in the stream of Bengali drama, *Janmabhumi Aaj* is an important addition. The play is built centring on the social reality of post-independence India, the state, the sense of nationalism, the life struggle of ordinary people, and the crisis of human values. The central theme of the play '*Janmabhumi Aaj*' is national identity and the real life of people. In the play, Badal Sircar raised the question—is the motherland merely a piece of territory, or is it the collective experience of people's rights, dignity, and freedom? Even many years after independence, when poverty, inequality, unemployment, communalism, and political violence engulf society, then the very concept of 'Janmabhumi' (Motherland)

demands a fresh evaluation. The play does not propagate any specific political ideology; rather, it critically judges the relationship between the state and the citizen. It is this perspective that grants the play a distinct dignity among contemporary political plays.

From the perspective of acting style, *Janmabhumī Aaj* was completely reliant on collective acting. In Badal Sircar's Third Theatre, instead of a hero-centricity dependent on individuals, group acting is given paramount importance. There was no exception to this in the case of this play either. Chorus-like dialogue, collective body language, rhythmic pacing, and the creative use of silence built the atmosphere of the play. Many times, the bodies of the actors themselves turned into symbols of the crowd, the border wall, or the state machinery. To convey horrific scenes like the partition of the country, riots, or displacement, the actors created a living sculpture with the help of their physical gestures and choreography. This symbolic acting did not merely make the audience follow the story, it inspired them to think about the inherent political and humanistic significance of the play.

Bhoma is one of Badal Sircar's greatest plays and a unique creation of the mature phase of his Third Theatre. Written in 1979, this play was later included in the regular exhibitions of the Satabdi theatre group at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata. The central character of the play '*Bhoma*', Bhoma, is not an individual person; he is a symbol. He is the collective manifestation of landless farmers, tribal labourers, and all the deprived people of society. Transcending the crisis of individual life, the play constructs a language of protest against social exploitation, state apathy, and the inequality of power. Through this play, Badal Sircar showed that the main maker of history is not any special individual, but rather ordinary people, by whose labour society is built but whose existence remains the most neglected. Regarding acting, collective body language was one of the main features of the play. Instead of individual acting, the entire group worked like a living organism. Emotion of the play was created sometimes through

chorus, sometimes through collective pronunciation, sometimes through rhythmic stepping, and sometimes through complete silence. Badal Sircar's belief was that the actor's body is the biggest asset of the Third Theatre. A successful realization of this concept is seen in the staging of *Bhoma*. The architecture of the hall room of the Theosophical Society was also especially helpful in presenting this play. There was no permanent division between the audience and the actors here. As a result, the actors acted sometimes amidst the audience, and sometimes right in front of them. The audience did not merely watch the play; they became part of the theatrical experience.

The sound design of the play was also highly restrained but meaningful. Instead of artificial sound effects, the use of actors' voices, group footsteps, clapping, the sound of feet, and simple musical instruments created the atmosphere of the play. The political message of the play is made even more powerful through folk music, rhymes, and beats. This sound construction established a direct connection with the emotions and thoughts of the audience.

Manikanchan is a relatively less discussed but important play of Badal Sircar. It was staged in 1977 as a production of the Satabdi theatre group at the Theosophical Society Hall. The subject matter of the play '*Manikanchan*' is built centering on the mental complexity of humans, social relationships, the desire for power, and the crisis of values. The very name of the play is a symbol—'Mani' (Jewel) and 'Kanchan' (Gold) are traditionally symbols of wealth, opulence, and attraction. Badal Sircar has used this symbol to express the conflict between human's external success and internal emptiness. The characters of the play constantly engage in conflict between social establishment and personal interests. As a result, the play is not merely a story of personal relationships; it is also a criticism of the class degradation, consumerism, and human alienation of modern society.

In the staging of the play at the Theosophical Society Hall, conventional realistic stage decorations were not used. On an almost

empty stage, the space and time of the play were constructed with the help of the actors' bodies, voices, and group arrangements. Keeping the imaginative power of the audience active was the objective of this staging. One of the main features of the acting was a collective style of expression. Alongside dialogues, silence, rhythmic footsteps, changes in group positions, and symbolic body language created the atmosphere of the play. Without making the emotion of the play melodramatic, it was presented in a restrained manner. The intimate environment of the Theosophical Society made the psychological and symbolic aspects of this play even brighter. The audience could feel the emotions, crises, and conflicts of the characters from very close. This staging established that very principle of the Third Theatre which dictates that the true power of a play does not lie in technology, but is inherent in the direct relationship between the actor and the audience.

Michhil (Procession) is one of Badal Sircar's early political plays. It is one of the plays from the early period of the Third Theatre, and later it was staged as part of the regular productions of the Satabdi group at the Theosophical Society Hall. The main symbol of the play *Michhil* is the collective forward march. Here, 'Michhil' is not a rally of any specific political party, but rather a metaphor for people's collective protest, the demand for justice, and the desire for social change. Instead of individual-centric plays, Badal Sircar here turned the collective mass into the main character of the play. Every character in the play represents the larger society, and their collective presence constructs the power of the play. An old path-walker is seen in the play who is constantly searching for a real procession that will show the path of light to the people. On the other hand, there is a young man named 'Khoka' who is killed without reason, and his dead body becomes a heartbreaking symbol of this falling social system and lost youth.

In the staging of *Michhil* at the Theosophical Society, the philosophy of the Third Theatre was fully followed. Instead of the heavy stage decor, realistic sets, complex lighting arrangements, or expensive costumes of the conventional proscenium stage, the play

was presented in a highly restrained manner. The bodies of the actors, voices, rhythmic movements, and collective acting were the main strength of the play. A few simple objects—such as cloth, bamboo, rope, or a flag—were used in various symbolic meanings. Sometimes the same cloth became the banner of the crowd, sometimes an obstacle, and sometimes a symbol of struggle. This metaphorical stage construction activated the imagination of the audience.

In terms of acting as well, *Michhil* was completely dependent on group acting. No single hero or central character controls the play; rather, the entire group takes the form of a living 'Procession.' The collective marching of the actors, chorus-like dialogues, simultaneous use of body language, and collective rhythm made the political message of the play visible. Many times the bodies of the actors themselves became symbols of the wave of the masses, the street, the barricade, or state power. This acting style is one of the main characteristics of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre.

Among the regular productions of the 'Satabdi' theatre group at the Theosophical Society Hall, *Trinsha Shatabdi* (1966) (The Thirtieth Century) was a prominent one. It is essentially a sharply anti-war play. The destruction caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan at the end of the Second World War and the resulting humanitarian disaster is the main backdrop of this play. In this play, through the imagined form of future society, he presented the crisis of contemporary civilization, war, dependence on technology, power politics, and the degradation of human values through sharp satire and symbols. The central character of the play is a writer or intellectual who constantly goes through a mental conflict. He is forced to answer in his dreams or imagination to the people of the future (the Thirtieth Century)—why did the people of the twentieth century engage in such a terrifying massacre? From the scientist who invented the atomic bomb to the pilot who dropped it (Claude Eatherly)—the mental agony, guilt, and the crisis of civilization of everyone have been portrayed very skilfully in this play. When the

narrative of this devastation is staged in the enclosed and small hall room of the Theosophical Society, the horror of war directly crashes into the minds of the audience. It has been shown in the play that despite technological progress and scientific advancement, if human beings lose humanity, freedom, and class values, then the civilization of the future will become even more cruel and inhuman. In this play, Badal Sircar presented before the audience a picture of such a society where humans are subordinate to machines, power is centralized to the extreme, and individual freedom is increasingly shrinking. For this reason, the play is not merely a science fiction; it is a profound political and philosophical allegory.

In this play, on an almost empty stage, the actors' bodies, voices, rhythmic movements, and symbolic positions created the atmosphere of the play. A few simple objects—such as cloth, rope, wooden blocks, or bamboo—were used in various symbolic meanings. Sometimes they took the form of the future city civilization, sometimes a prison, and sometimes a power structure. Like *Michhil*, in this play as well, instead of a single hero, the entire group of actors functioned as a collective entity. The emotion of the play was expressed through chorus-like dialogue, collective body language, rhythmic walking, and symbolic gestures. Often, the bodies of the actors became symbols of a machine, a wall, a crowd, or a system of governance. This acting style activated the imagination of the audience and helped in realizing the symbolic meaning of the play.

When discussing Badal Sircar's plays, the name of the Theosophical Society inevitably comes up. How an ordinary room can become the witness to a historic cultural movement, the Theosophical Society is an excellent example of that. A visionary playwright was looking for such a place that would reject the colonial structure of theatre, and an ordinary hall room in the heart of the city stood up as the canvas to fulfil that dream. The Third Theatre had changed the body and soul of Bengali theatre form, and the first witness to that change was the Bengal Theosophical Society of College Square. Today, those regular

performances of the Satabdi group may no longer take place there, Badal Sircar may no longer be there either, but the spirit of that hall room of the Theosophical Society still lives on and will continue to live on in any tent or any open-air stage play of modern Bengali alternative theatre. This hall room has gone on to prove that theatre is actually not the illusion of bricks, wood, stone, and velvet curtains; theatre is the endless, direct, and living communication of humans with humans.

There are other theoretical aspects of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre which are intricately connected with the performance space of the Theosophical Society. He believed that theatre is a living medium of human communication. The fundamental difference between theatre and cinema or television lies here, that in theatre, the actor and the audience share the same space and time. In the performances at the Theosophical Society, this matter of sharing or partaking reached the highest level. Badal Sircar's main goal was to build a psychological bridge between the educated middle class of the city and the working people of the village. At the Theosophical Society, he familiarized the city people with the harsh reality of the village, and when he went to the villages with those same plays, the rural people became aware of the exploitation structure of the city. The hall room of the Theosophical Society had no fixed shape or seating arrangement. Depending on the demands of the play, the layout of that room would change every day. The way the audience was seated around for the play '*Michhil*', the seating arrangement would be different during the play '*Bhoma*'. This flexibility is impossible on a proscenium stage. To run a proscenium theatre, a lot of money is required. As a result, theatre groups often become dependent on sponsors or the government, which creates obstacles to the expression of their independent views. By performing plays on a zero budget at the Theosophical Society, Badal Sircar liberated theatre from this economic slavery. The commute of the actors and the nominal expenses of the play were raised through the hat collection in a bag. This self-reliant model is still an ideal for many open-air theatre groups today.

To remember Badal Sircar in a thoughtful space like the Theosophical Society, it is perhaps most significant to conclude with the talk of *Evam Indrajit*. Because this play does not give us any easy answers; rather, it teaches us to ask questions. And it is within questioning that the beginning of self-discovery lies. Written in 1963 and published and staged in 1965, this play is not just an aesthetic experiment against conventional theatrical styles; it is a profound dramatization of the existential crisis, monotony, alienation, and the search for the meaning of life of the post-independence Indian middle-class person. The play established Badal Sircar as a modern Indian playwright and played a crucial role in building the intellectual foundation for his subsequent move towards the Third Theatre.

Evam Indrajit does not have a well-structured story in the conventional sense. At the centre of the play are Amal, Bimal, Kamal, and Indrajit. The first three seem to be three copies of the same social mould. Their lives proceed on a specific path of birth, school, college, job, marriage, family, and death. Consequently, individual life here loses its uniqueness and turns into a mechanical life cycle. Even within this repetition, Indrajit is a symbol of the desire for individuality. But his position is also not completely free in the end. He wants to reject conventional life, but that rejection does not lead him to any certain alternative life. As a result, 'Indrajit' is simultaneously a rebel and a prisoner. This conflict is the central existential crisis of the play. An important feature of the play is that—instead of moving forward, life here repeatedly comes back. The life from birth to death that we consider as progress, the playwright discovers the structure of repetition and meaninglessness within it. In the words of a critic, the subject matter of the play is essentially the inability and restlessness of humans trapped in a predetermined life cycle to find the meaning of life.

Amal, Bimal, and Kamal are not just three individual characters; they are social types of the middle-class society. The similarity of their names indicates the obliteration of their individual identities.

Even though they are different people, they lead the same kind of life. Whatever slight difference in personality exists among them, the social structure ultimately erases it. On the other hand, the word 'Evam' (And) used before the name Indrajit is highly significant. 'Evam' usually implies addition, but here it is the mark of alienation. Indrajit is connected with Amal-Bimal-Kamal, yet isolated from them. He is one of them, yet does not want to be like them. As a result, the word 'Evam' reveals the dual position of the character—he is a part of society and at the same time an individual standing against society. In the play, Manasi is not merely a representative of love or relationships. Her presence gives a humanistic dimension to Indrajit's self-searching. Indrajit's rebellion is social on one hand, and deeply personal on the other. Through his relationship with Manasi, it becomes understood that complete isolation is not a path to liberation. Here, the conflict between human loneliness and the desire to reach out to other humans is seen. Consequently, the play does not only speak of 'meaninglessness'; rather, it also searches for meaning.

The play is often identified as an important Absurd play from the early days of the Bengali language. However, it is not correct to call it a direct imitation of Western Absurd theatre. Although the existential and absurd consciousness of Beckett, Camus, and others influenced the play, Badal Sircar used that style in a new way with Indian social reality. Like Absurd plays, here too, instead of a simple narrative, the presence of repetition, alienation, meaninglessness, and incompleteness is noticed. But Badal Sircar's specialty is that this 'Absurdity' is not an abstract European existential crisis; it is connected to the reality of middle-class life in Kolkata.

Another important feature of the play is its self-reflexive or self-conscious theatrical style. The play brings forward the process of itself being a play. The character of the 'Writer' blurs the boundaries between the playwright, the character, and the audience. As a result, the audience does not remain merely a spectator of the story; they become a partner in the process of making the play. The characters

of the play seemingly act out their own roles and at the same time try to understand the meaning of their own lives. This self-consciousness separates '*Evam Indrajit*' from conventional realistic theatrical styles.

The most important aspect of *Evam Indrajit* is its existential consciousness. Even though political freedom came to Indian society after independence, freedom in the individual lives of human beings, meaning, and the question of self-identity were not easily resolved. The urban middle-class person got educated, got a job, started a family, but a kind of deep sense of meaning gradually got lost from their lives. The playwright expresses this situation through questions. Why do humans live? Where is the meaning of life in repeatedly doing the same tasks? Can an individual truly dictate their own life, or does society, family, economy, and traditional values pre-determine their life? For this reason, *Evam Indrajit* is not just the story of an individual; it is the dramatized form of the mental state of a generation. It is the name of the crisis of self-identity of modern humans. It reminds us—humans are not born merely to survive; they also have to find the meaning of their existence. And it is here that a deep bridge is built between Badal Sircar's theatrical thoughts and the Theosophical Society. Just as Theosophical thought calls upon humans to look towards their inner soul behind the veil of external identity, Badal Sircar's play also forces us to question by removing the cover of conventional life—Who am I? Where am I going? What is the meaning of my life?

Badal Sircar may not have left us with the answers to these questions. Rather, his greatest achievement—he has taught us to ask questions. And so today, as we go to remember Badal Sircar in this historic space of the Theosophical Society, let that unfinished question of *Evam Indrajit* remain with us— Will we merely survive by becoming Amal, Bimal, Kamal? Or will we one day find our own '*Indrajit*'? Let Badal Sircar's plays live on within this question. Let his theatre live on within this question. And within this question—perhaps—let our own search live on.

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A 'Critical Disability' Reading of *Tara: A Stage Play in Two Acts* by Mahesh Dattani

Sahabuddin Ahamed & Ashutosh Singh

ABSTRACT

This essay critically examines the socio-cultural and political constructions of disability and their impacts on the oppressed and marginalized subjects in Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara: A Stage Play in Two Acts* (2000) in the light of 'critical disability' theory. In the play, Dattani highlights the issue of disability through the portrayal of conjoined twin protagonists, Tara and Chandan. It explores the ways in which persons with disabilities are stigmatized, devalued, discriminated, and marginalized based on power, gender, and sex. The patriarchal hegemonic culture reinforces the physical and psychological conditions of the disabled people and simultaneously undermine their abilities for and beliefs in self-transformation, self-realization, self-determination, and self-reliance. The paper attempts to unfold the dominant meaning-making process, essentialist perspectives, and reinforcement of unjust stereotypes which are applied to woman with disabilities, granting them the marginal status in every sphere of life. The play's treatment of disability evokes a need of replacing the common socio-political assumptions regarding it and simultaneously reassigning new narratives and meanings to it in a more symbolic way. Its task is to challenge the distinction between ability and disability, to bring about justice for disabled subjects and to transform the oppressive and dehumanizing circumstances under

which they live. The ‘critical disability’ theory of Rosemarie Garland-Thompson and Simi Linton is used in the paper.

Keywords: disability, Siamese twins, gender stereotype, marginalization, patriarchal normalcy, self-reinvention

INTRODUCTION

“... gender (or disability) is a way of signifying relationships of power”—(Garland-Thompson 6)

“Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being”—(Beauvoir 26)

“The problem of disability is relocated from the individual, to the barriers and attitude which disable her. It is not the disabled person to blame, but the society.”—(Shakespeare 200)

‘Critical disability’ theory focuses on the socio-cultural, political, linguistic, and ideological formations of disability and their impacts on disabled persons. It addresses the ways in which persons with disabilities are stigmatized, devalued, naturalized, and discriminated through these dominant systems. The existing hegemonic discourses reinforce the physical and psychological conditions of disabled people and simultaneously undermine their abilities for and beliefs in self-transformation, self-realization, self-determination, and self-reliance. Disabled are categorized such as disabled women and men not only in relation to gender, but also in relation to power, position, and opportunity. The critical disability theorist Simi Linton points out that “similarly, it is important to examine the nondisabled position and its privilege and power. It is not the neutral, universal position from which disabled people deviate, rather it is a category of people whose power and cultural capital keep them at the center” (171). Disability studies aim at challenging the distinction between ability and disability, bringing about justice for disabled subjects

and transforming the oppressive and dehumanizing circumstances under which they live. It evokes a need of replacing the common socio-political assumptions and meanings regarding disability and simultaneously reassigning new meanings to the disabled people in a more symbolic way. One of the major tasks of this study is "the denaturalization of disability" ("Critical" n. p.).

With regard to disabled people and the nature of their representations, disability theory uncovers disability's marginal position, subaltern identity, absence in dominant cultural milieus, and lack of rights and opportunities. It critiques dominant culture's ideological view, control, and formation of disabled people and their pervasive passive roles and disadvantageous life. Simi Linton argues that "the term *disability* is a linchpin in a complex web of social ideals, institutional structures, and government policies" (162; original emphasis). A more feminist approach in disability is articulated by Susan Wendell in her essay "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability." She raises concern about the issues of women body and women's oppression which affect the personal, social, cultural, and psychological conditions of women with physical disabilities (243). Women with disabilities are 'doubly' oppressed through "the oppressions of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppressions of being disabled in societies dominated by the abled-bodied" (Wendell 244).

In *Tara*, Mahesh Dattani realistically depicts the negative role of parents for their daughter, Tara. The familial conflicts continue till the early death of the protagonist, Tara. Tara is bold, courageous, and rebellious against unjust traditional social norms. Dattani questions the marginal status granted to women in the traditional Indian society. He comments on the *phallogocentrism* of the patriarchal Indian social systems in which Tara is denied values of individual choice, agency, humanity—the life of an autonomous, normal human being, and the possibility of a happy life, and is reduced to a subaltern because she is compelled to donate one leg of hers to her twin brother,

Chandan, the favourite male child of the Patel family. Her voice and individual identity are subdued because of her status as a disabled girl. She obviously becomes passive, helpless, and marginal victim due to discrimination and domination in the male oriented society. Through the plight of the protagonist Tara, Dattani critiques the discriminatory attitude of the parents who are in favour of their male child, Chandan, ignoring the agency and identity of their female child, Tara. The play portrays the plight of the disabled and marginal who are ostracized, suppressed, and devalued in patriarchal society.

Unlike disability studies in the West that overlook the interrelated issues including caste, class, race, and gender, disability studies in the East deals with these issues. Feminism has been an inseparable part of disability studies due to disabled women's experiences of gender oppression and dehumanization. In India, disabled women are more oppressed and discriminated against than disabled men. It is important to take into account the plight of women with disability in India in relation to their physical impairments and gender roles.

Tara deals with sufferings and victimization of disabled persons in Indian patriarchal society. It demonstrates the ways in which gender and sexual identities are merged through dominant normative cultural discourse. As it reveals the nature of oppression and domination of disabled through the nondisabled authority and its privileged position. In addressing disability in relation to class, gender, and sexual orientation, it gives voice to the disabled and oppressed to combat the existing dominant ideology and its meaning-making process through which they are oppressed and excluded. This oppressive system prevents them from being positive, self-reliant, and self-determined and is responsible for their lack of opportunities, personal achievements, and well-being. It highlights traumatized and oppressed children and their survival strategies amidst the different domestic, socio-cultural, and political spheres that prioritize male children over female ones. It boldly depicts common stereotypes in patriarchal Indian society that assign certain meanings and norms

to those disadvantaged and marginal to bear out of their desire and recognition. In this play, disabled characters are compelled to seek their happiness and personal achievement by bearing both the personal burden of their own body and the unreasonable societal and cultural norms that dehumanize them and are imposed on them to follow. In an article, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson marks the processes of socially and culturally constructed concept of disability based on difference in which disabled bodies are categorized as abnormal, incomplete, dependent, ugly, deformed, and passive, while privileged nondisabled bodies are seen as normal, complete, beautiful, competent, independent, and fit. As she writes:

“The disability/ability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Although this comparison of bodies is ideological rather than biological, it nevertheless penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment.” (5)

The play effectively depicts the characters' fractures psyche, repressed desires, enforced acceptance of unreasonable traditional norms, and adherence to socio-cultural construction of gender and identity in a patriarchal society in which they live. It focuses on gender oppression, alienation of women, immoral and unjust nature of discrimination, and family favour of male child over female one. Women are prone to discrimination, marginalization, dehumanization, injustice, exploitation, and domination as a result of socialization and patriarchal normalcy. They are forced to accept and live under the hegemonic socio-cultural norms. In this play, Bharati ruins her daughter's life. Though Tara and Chandan are two disabled persons, only Tara goes through 'double' marginalization. The play illustrates the impacts of dominant ideology, essentialist perspectives, and reinforcement of unjust stereotypes on women, and which are applied to women, and which grant them marginal status in every sphere of life.

ANALYSIS

Tara graphically portrays contradiction, normalcy, and hypocrisy to which an individual is subjected to accept them. Different identification factors like class, gender, sexuality, religion, language, and culture act as obstacles for an individual's self-articulation, self-realization, and self-determination, and self-representation. It delves into the deep cracks, oppression, power axes, and inhumanity through which familism is built and retains its fake morality and adjustment. Age-old patriarchal society's double standard is apparent as it regulates individual freedom, gender discrimination against women, and certain attitudes for one to strictly follow. The play revolves around the physical separation of Chandan and Tara, the Siamese twins. They have three legs, but their effectiveness depends on Tara's body. Their physical separation through the surgical operation is done in such way that Chandan has two legs while Tara remains with one leg. It is done due to the unreasonable tradition that prioritizes a boy child to survive. The operation is manipulated by her family members who favour Chandan. After the operation, Chandan's leg is not supported by his body, resulting in mutilation. Despite having her intelligence, strong will, humanity, and ability for self-determination, Tara is denied the same opportunity and normal life as her brother. Consequently, her constant sufferings from several physical complications result in her early death.

With a sense of guilt over his sister's death, Chandan migrates to London, adopting the name Dan. In London, he attempts to hide the contrition of killing his sister. He strives to start a new life there by erasing his past and the incident of his sister's demise. It is Tara who accepts the decision of giving one leg of hers to Chandan so that he could have two legs and survive. She is compelled to do so, because, for being a girl, she knows well that she is required not to exceed the traditions of society. It is because of her status as marginalized and underprivileged. In this sense, her premature demise is brought about by the patriarchal attitudes of the society where she is forced to

compromise them. Despite knowing the plan of the surgery in favour of him and its impact on Tara, Chandan accepts it. Even though he is against his wish as he is forced to do by his family members who strictly adhere to patriarchal beliefs. Later he suffers from mental torment and repressed desire, leading to a life of his isolation, trouble, and guilty consciousness. To him life appears to be miserable, lonely, and unbearable without his personal history and his sister. He laments for the past life in which they were interdependent, inalienable, and two parts of the same life. Though he desperately strives to be away from his past life history, it haunts him in the memories of Tara and his guilt. He therefore continues the burden of being frustrated, alienated, and lost.

In his work, Dattani seems to challenge the rigid gender binary because both masculinity and femininity are interdependent and innate quality of an individual's identity. In this context, gender division is undesirable and unjust as it brings abuse, inequality, discrimination, and inhumanity to an individual identity and humanity. Both men and women are equal and to be valued in every sphere of life. The unjust and immoral social systems are responsible for the construction of gender norms that Dattani attempts to bring to fore. According to Judith Butler, female body becomes "a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed" in order to exercise unequal power, privilege, control, and domination in which females are excluded and oppressed (12). Chandan and Tara symbolize both self-masculine and self-feminine respectively in their disabled positions. They are "two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities" (Mee 281). The family's priority of Chandan over Tara represents a male's privileged and dominant position than a female's, exposing patriarchal hegemony. Tara becomes an "Other," a socially constructed category which restricts her autonomy and individualism. She expresses her agony and reaction to the injustice done towards her:

“And me. Maybe we still are. Like we’ve always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out. . . . And separated” (Dattani I. 285).

Her above words strongly indicate the importance of innate nature of gender identity in one’s life. The separation of gendered self brings about the rendering of humanity in many ways especially death in case of herself. The family’s gender prejudice creates problems for the conjoined twins. Chandan finds himself in internal dilemma as he is unable forget his previous self-identity and to overcome his emotional breakdown. He feels an incomplete history, incomplete identity without his twin sister. Haunted by past memories of his sister, he lives a troubled and helplessness life due to the dominant traditions that restrict his freedom, desire, and self-determination. This clearly reveals the multidimensional nature of patriarchy that are functional in the very structures of typical Indian societies. Patriarchal hegemony enters the realm of collective human psyche and reinforces its dominant assumptions, rendering individuals passive and inert and disempowering them. Therefore, the family’s preference for boy child suggests a man’s privileged and dominant position in various aspects of life. In regard to financial stability, though Tara is not a barrier to the family, it discriminates against her by preferring Chandan to run business. Though the notion of familism is centred on care, love, affection, comfort, and understanding among family members, it lacks for women in a conventional patriarchal society.

The play vividly lays bare the dark truths of the typical Indian familial and social norms that treat female children differently based on rigid gender systems. It addresses the function of social construction of gender in which males and females are assigned fixed roles to be performed. In this context, men are placed in higher status than women because of gender bias – male’s roles are expected in a society by ignoring female’s. Gender oppression is done to Tara when she is required to stay at home while her twin brother is encouraged to run family business and go abroad for studies. Tara ironically replies:

"The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (Dattani I. 288). Obviously, this is a result of gender-biased division of work in which men and women are expected to perform their assigned duties in a patriarchal norm. In addition, sex-biased division of labour affects both males and females, and even it becomes an obstacle to men, as it restricts their abilities, capacities, interests, and self-creativities. The play seems to dismantle strict gender roles as exemplified by Chandan's wish to do domestic duty what is traditionally considered as feminine quality, as he states that: "I might stay back in the cave and do my jigsaw puzzle" (Dattani I. 288). In stark contrast, Tara is more interested in pursuing a public job like other males. Chandan's father, Mr. Patel rages at him for doing domestic work at home and rebukes him to knit clothes like women. In this regard, the absolute binary oppositions between men and women are unstable because of their dependency on each other and multiple performative and relational roles. In her groundbreaking work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that there exists the 'decentred' nature of sexuality and gender, as exemplified in the case of imposed sexual categories-homosexual and heterosexual. She argues that both categories are interdependent for their meanings through their "simultaneous subsumption and exclusion" from each other and "internal and external" to each other (10).

In this play, ironically, women are not free from their negative roles in supporting and continuing discrimination against women in a conventional patriarchal society. During surgical operation, Bharti, despite being a woman, prefers the male child. Mr. Patel reveals the dark truths about the surgery that is done in favour of the male child:

"A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were better that the leg would survive. . . on the girl. Your grandfather and mother had a private meeting with Dr Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come. That same

evening your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned. Except—I couldn't believe what she told me—that they would risk giving both legs to the boy. . . Maybe I had protested more strongly!" (Dattani II. 331-2)

The play unveils the impacts of patriarchal value-systems on individuals in such a way that such value-systems are internalized by them and under which they live. Therefore, in this manner, women become an instrument to be controlled by men and are used against other women in a passive and apathetic manner. This is what Bharati does against Tara.

Over the course of the play, Bharati confesses her guilt that her decision was wrong that she has ruined her daughter's life. It is only after the unsuccessful operation, she recognizes her wrong decisions and becomes aware of the necessity of her daughter's emotion, love, and choice. She attempts to pamper Tara and provide her with much more care, love, and affection, and happiness in time of great distress. As her words prove a change in herself and motherly affections to look after her physically handicapped child in the best possible way:

"She. . . she must make more friends. Chandan is alright—he has his writing, but she. . . He is different, he is sort of self-contained, but Tara . . . She can be very good company and she has talents. She can be very witty and of course she is an intelligent . . . I have seen to it that she . . . more than makes up in some ways for what she doesn't have." (Dattani I. 298)

Bharati feels guilty that she manipulated the surgical operation of the conjoined twins. After the operation, Tara undergoes physical and emotional torments, leading to her death. Bharati is emotionally broken and attempts to mask her guilty conscience by showing her excessive care, love, and affection to Tara.

Tara's death brings about domestic and emotional trouble in Bharati's life, as exposed in the bitter arguments between Bharati and her husband, Patel. Later she accuses Patel and attempts to show that

she loves and values her daughter more than her husband. Her guilty conscience makes her insane. Her torment for the wrong decision and for the bad condition of her daughter physically and mentally and her struggles for self-esteem seem to reveal the impacts of patriarchal ideals on women who are unable to move beyond their clutches. Tara is mentally shattered when she learns the truth about her mother's role in discrimination against her.

Dattani exhibits the ways of subduing and overpowering women like Tara by rigid socio-cultural norms. In a conversation, Bharati is deeply concerned about the plight of Tara. Because a girl child is less privileged in society:

"It's all right while she is young. It's all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you—but not her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh God!" (Dattani I. 306)

When Dr Thakkar explains the details of surgery to separate the conjoined twins that results in their complete sterility, Tara instantly comments: "Oh, what a waste! A waste of money. Why spend all the money to keep me alive? . . . I don't care! I don't care for anyone except mummy!" (Dattani II. 325)

Dattani's play intersperses the issue of disability, evoking sympathy along with other issues. Persons with disabilities are devalued, discriminated, and marginalized based on gender and power relation. The principal reason of gender stereotype is various socio-political forces and dominant cultural viewpoints that reinforce the physical and psychological conditions of disabled subjects and simultaneously undermine their abilities for and beliefs in self-transformation, self-realization, self-determination, and self-reliance as in the case of Tara.

Though Chandan and Tara are physically handicapped persons, they receive differential treatment from their family. They are being compelled to take on strict social positions and perform stereotypical

gender roles assigned by dominant socio-cultural norms. Tara is doubly marginalized as a female and a disabled in terms of patriarchy and gender. Dattani is critical of society's unjust attitudes towards disabled individuals as it treats disabled women differently than disabled men based on strict gender norms.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Dattani's play uncovers the dominant roles of familism and patriarchal ideals in affecting women, women with disability, and their self-identities, self-capacities, and self-determination and in rendering them passive, inert, and helpless. Disability and gender stereotype intersect in regard to the issue of Siamese twins in a conventional patriarchal society. The play addresses the plight of a girl with disability who succumbs to fatalism and the norms of patriarchal ideological society. Dattani unfolds the dark sides of Indian society in which disabled women are treated unjustly and differently than disabled men based on the strict gender norm. Women is reduced to a subordinate and a second-class citizen. Though tradition-bound society oppresses women, women are yet desirous, courageous, and confident to make a transformation and well-being for themselves. Dattani raises questions regarding the pre-determined norms of society and family in relation to gender and sex where women and disabled individuals go through identity crisis, discrimination, alienation, isolation, and dilemmas. The play's universal appeal to the audience is to support justice and emancipation for disabled persons with a humanistic approach. Therefore, the issue of disability is socio-cultural and political constructions that define and stigmatize particular bodies as disabled. It is to be understood not only for individuals with disabilities, but for everyone, as an embodiment of human experience and relationship-enhancing our understanding of the concept of human in our lives.

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Desire and Downfall in Christopher Marlowe's Tragedies: A Comprehensive Analysis

Molay Sarkar

ABSTRACT:

Desire, in some religious traditions and schools of thought, is treated as something intrinsically problematic and to some extent evil. But there is no denying that it is desire that lies at the very root of advancement. It was human desire to overcome the limitations imposed by nature that led to the advancement of knowledge as well as of science and technology. However, this desire sometimes, especially when unchecked, becomes the cause of destruction. In Marlowe's plays this truth is dramatised with subtle craftsmanship without being moralising like that of earlier religious plays, where desire has always been portrayed as sinful. Marlowe, to some extent, portrays desire as something admirable. It is their desire that makes his protagonists like Tamburlaine, Barabas, Doctor Faustus, or Edward II larger-than-life characters. And also this desire is that very thing that blinds them towards the truth and their duty, dehumanises them or makes them weak and leads to their ultimate downfall. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted nature of desire in tragedies that Marlowe used to interrogate human agency, disruption of universal balance and the limits of Renaissance individualism.

Keywords: Tragedy, tragic hero, desire, downfall,
Christopher Marlowe, Elizabethan drama,
Renaissance humanism.

The genre of drama witnessed an unprecedented flourishing in the Elizabethan era (1558-1603). Some of the most profound and enduring tragedies of the Western literary canon were produced during this time, and at the centre of this dramatic revolution was the distinct conception of the tragic hero, influenced by the Aristotelian concept as well as by the conflict between Christian religious doctrine and the emerging philosophy of Renaissance humanism. Unlike the mediaeval morality plays, which often depicted downfall as cosmic punishment for a sin of tremendous magnitude, Elizabethan tragedies, especially those of Christopher Marlowe, localise the reason for downfall within the individual, and the driving force towards destruction is the insatiable and overwhelming desire that leads to the pursuit of an objective that often defies morality, reason and order. The hero pushes beyond the bounds of acceptable universal order, attains a temporary breathtaking transcendence and moves forward to the inevitable, catastrophic collapse.

According to Christian doctrine, desire is not inherently evil. It argues that God placed desire in the human heart so that humanity would seek Him and that true satisfaction and ultimate joy can be achieved by directing this desire towards the creator. Psalm 37:4 of the English Standard Version of the Bible says, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desire of your heart." The central problem in Christianity is not human desire but its object and intensity. James 1:14-15 of the English Standard Version of the New Testament says, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." Therefore, the ultimate Christian goal is not the elimination of desire but its transformation. Though it warns against the desire for wealth and material possession ("For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils"-- Timothy

6:10), desire for sexuality that is detached from love, fidelity, dignity, humanity and moral responsibility (“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you should know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust.” – Thessalonians 4:3–5), desire for power and pride (“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” – Proverbs 16:18); it encourages desire for God.

Marlowe used this notion of excessive earthly or materialistic desire as the very reason for the downfall of the hero. Unlike the Aristotelian concept of ‘hamartia’, often translated as ‘error’ or ‘mistake of judgement’ of the tragic hero that leads to their downfall, it is the hero’s excessive desire beyond control that dissipates their moral judgement and leads to their demise. This desire thus works as the dramatic energy in most of Marlowe’s plays; the hero wants more than what human nature can safely accommodate. This, on the one hand, makes the hero an exalted character, as it expresses courage, imagination and self-assertion, and, on the other hand, sows the seed of his destruction. However, Marlowe does not simply condemn desire; if he did, the protagonist would become an outright villain, and the audience wouldn’t feel pity for them. Instead, he portrays desire as something that is recognisably humane, and therefore the audience can sympathise with the protagonist. But everything comes to a turning point when his desire begins to dominate over all other values. Faustus knows that the negotiation with Lucifer can be fatal, yet his desire to acquire limitless knowledge instigates him to interpret danger as an opportunity.

This pattern – the hero’s excessive desire that results in his rejection of divine limits and the subsequent destruction – can vividly be traced in the major plays of Christopher Marlowe: *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I* (1587); *Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* (1587–1588); *The Jew of Malta* (1589–1590); *Doctor Faustus* (1589–1592); and *Edward II* (1591–1592). Tamburlaine desires universal dominion and greatness beyond limit; Barabas desires revenge and “infinite riches”; Doctor Faustus

wants limitless knowledge and magical power; and King Edward desires to preserve personal affection and royal authority over kingly responsibilities.

In *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I & Part II*, Marlowe presents the purest distillation of the desire for earthly power. Tamburlaine, a Scythian shepherd, driven by an unquenchable thirst for sovereignty, rises to become a world-conquering emperor. He asserts that this drive is grounded not in mere political expediency but is in human nature itself:

“Nature that framed us of four elements,

Warring within our breast for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.”

(*Tamburlaine the Great, Part I, Act II, Scene 7*)

This desire for the ‘earthly crown’, to Tamburlaine, is an elevated spiritual imperative, not merely a political ambition. Marlowe strips him of the traditional moral values. He is ruthless, widely successful, and, for a certain period of time, seems invincible. He defeats kings and captures their kingdoms; political hierarchy becomes an instrument of his will. With his oratory excellence, he talks about violence as something of grandeur. He does not think of a limited kingdom but a world that he can possess with force.

Part I also foretells Tamburlaine's downfall. His relationship with Zenocrate presents an alternative point of view to his character—the

conqueror is humanised in love. His grief in Part II at Zenocrate's death exposes the vulnerability that he cannot overcome with his military prowess. He can defeat enemies and capture kingdoms but cannot defeat mortality. Yet he demands that heaven participate in his mourning for Zenocrate, which shows the scale of his refusal to accept limitation. Tamburlaine's reaction to Zenocrate's death is significant. It transforms personal grief into cosmic rebellion. He wants the universe to recognise the death of a single human being. This episode poses a visible contradiction in his character—he wants to be absolute, but at the end he is only a mortal being. This paradox is further intensified in Part II. He continues to conquer, yet his victory produces disgust instead of exaltation; his logic of conquest becomes self-consuming, and he becomes even more ruthless, inflicting torture and humiliation on his captives. The man who once wanted to dominate the world has now become isolated from ordinary human bonds.

The final blow comes when Tamburlaine becomes ill. So far he has treated his body as an instrument of conquest. But it now refuses to be obedient to him. The conqueror who had previously imagined himself as capable of being master of the world has now been reduced to the physical limits of the body. However, Tamburlaine remains defiant even in his illness. He seemingly does not learn the moral lesson, and his ambition does not die. His tragedy is that he cannot accept the condition that his body imposes. He can conquer the world but not death. His downfall thus demonstrates the ultimate limit of power. Stephen Greenblatt observes that Marlowe's heroes construct themselves against the established authority, and their identities depend upon their constant act of self-fashioning. This observation goes appropriately with Tamburlaine. He constructs his identity with repeated acts of autonomy, and when mortality interrupts, the entire foundation of his constructed identity becomes unstable.

The Jew of Malta (1589–1590) offers another kind of downfall. Barabas is a wealthy merchant, and his constructed identity is inseparable from his property. When the city governor confiscates

his property in order to finance the state's military needs, Barabas not only loses his wealth but also the very foundation of his identity and is consumed with thoughts of revenge. From this point he becomes increasingly Machiavellian – he starts manipulating his daughter Abigail, his servant Ithamore, the nuns, the governor, the Turks and others. This initially seems to give him power over everyone around him, but gradually this very system of manipulation that he has created becomes impossible to control. He becomes so consumed in his idea of revenge that he even kills his own daughter by poisoning her when she converts to Christianity and becomes a nun. This is the very moment when his self-fashioning becomes self-destruction, as Abigail is the last emotional bond capable of restraining Barabas from vengeance. Once Abigail is gone, Barabas becomes even more isolated from human qualities.

On the other hand, Ithamore's betrayal proves the instability of criminal alliances. Barabas recruits Ithamore as he finds him a useful instrument for fulfilling his purpose. However, Ithamore eventually becomes a threat as he starts blackmailing Barabas, being manipulated by a prostitute and her pimp. Barabas's belief that he can manipulate others without being manipulated shatters here, and his own scheme turns against him. Barabas also believes that he can make profit by exploiting the political conflict between Malta and the Turks. But eventually the political world turns his own mechanism against him, and the elaborate plan that he schemed to have his revenge ends with leading him to his physical destruction.

While Tamburlaine desires dominion over the physical world and Barabas over wealth, Doctor Faustus desires limitless knowledge as well as intellectual and metaphysical dominance. Faustus is the quintessence of Renaissance humanism – he is a master of logic, medicine, law and theology. But these are not sufficient for him. He wants knowledge that transcends academic boundaries; he longs for the knowledge that brings power:

“...Divinity, adieu!
These metaphysics of magicians
And necromantic books are heavenly:
Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters:
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
(*Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I)

Faustus wants godlike agency; he wants command over nature, over the hidden forces of the universe. To him, “A sound magician is a mighty god.” So he tries his “brains to gain a deity.” It is this epistemological desire that leads him to pursue necromancy and sign a deal with Lucifer – twenty-four years of omnipotence in exchange for his eternal soul. But soon we realise that his magical power has turned his intellectual ambition into mere material desire:

“I’ll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.”
(*Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I)

Faustus’s downfall is deeply psychological and spiritual. His longing for infinite knowledge soon degenerates into trivial pursuits; he plays pranks, conjures illusions, makes the spirit of Helen appear.

The tragedy of Faustus lies in the paradox of his desire: he seeks infinite knowledge and absolute freedom but binds himself to ultimate slavery and spiritual blindness. His final soliloquy reflects his realisation of the price that he has to pay for his transgressive desire. His soaring ambition has now reduced to a desperate and impossible wish to escape his ultimate damnation:

“O soul, be changed into little water-drops,
And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found!”
(*Doctor Faustus*, Act V, Scene 2)

The fact that Faustus knows his own danger yet intensifies the tragedy. He is perfectly aware of the Christian teaching and knows the significance of repentance yet repeatedly hesitates. The scenes where the 'Good Angel' and 'Bad Angel' appear, in fact, externalise Faustus's inner conflict – he wants to repent but delays it. As the clock moves towards the allotted time, he becomes more desperate and tries to bargain. He begs the heavens to stop the movement of the universe. His final cry: "My God, my God, look not so fierce on me! / Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while.! / Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!/ I'll burn my books! —Ah, Mephistophilis!" (*Doctor Faustus*, Act V, Scene II) dramatises the final reversal of his earlier confidence.

The downfall of Faustus is therefore not merely a punishment of a sinner. It is the collapse of his self-fashioning, the very destruction of his self-created identity – he wanted omnipotence, god-like power and command over nature but at the end discovers that human beings can never go beyond mortality.

Edward II (1591–1592) presents a different treatment of desire; here the protagonist does not seek unlimited supernatural or imperial power. Nor does he desire forbidden knowledge or wealth or vengeance. He desires only to be with his personal favourite, Piers Gaveston. His desire for Gaveston's company is so intense that he is even willing to give up his kingdom and ruin his marriage as long as he can have Gaveston:

“...Make several kingdoms of this monarchy,
And share it equally amongst you all,
So I may have some nook or corner left,
To frolic with my dearest Gaveston.”

(*Edward II*, Act I, Scene IV)

King Edward's desire is, therefore, immediate and personal; and his tragedy lies in the conflict between personal longing and royal responsibilities as a king. He prioritises his personal affection over his duty as a king, and the private preference becomes the constitutional

crisis. According to the mediaeval and Renaissance points of view, a king, instead of being a mere individual, was the embodiment of the kingdom, and the interests of the state were to come first, not his personal inclination. Edward in his love for Gaveston defies this established notion. He elevates the baseborn Gaveston to the rank of nobility and showers him with wealth and titles, inciting the ire of the nobles. He thinks that his royal authority is capable of protecting his personal desire. But he forgets that ruling involves a network of relationships between the king, his courtiers, the barons, and others. He refuses to settle the dispute that rises over Gaveston between himself and his royal accomplices. As a result, they, led by younger Mortimer, eventually rebel against the king.

Edward's fall is excruciatingly gradual and multifaceted; his military is defeated, he is forced to abdicate, systematically humiliated, imprisoned in a sewer, deprived of sleep, food, and dignity, and, finally, murdered in a brutal, agonising way. In *Edward II*, Marlowe depicts both the physical and psychological destruction of a king who thought himself to be God's anointed deputy but at last is reduced to being a weeping wretch.

A comparative study of these plays reveals a clear, evolutionary trajectory of the downfall of Marlovian heroes. Each protagonist shows a different face of desire and the extreme to which an individual can strive to reach to fulfil this desire, and each downfall reveals the limit beyond which no human can go. Tamburlaine's desire is physical and martial; his downfall is simple yet universal — the inability to escape death. He can conquer the world but must submit to death. Barabas desires economic freedom, and when his wealth is confiscated, he seeks vengeance. His downfall is social and ironic; he uses manipulation to get what he wants but becomes the victim of his own plan that he devises for others' downfall. Faustus desires limitless knowledge that can give god-like agency and omnipotence and tries to push the boundary of human limits. His downfall is spiritual and metaphysical. Finally, Edward neglects his kingly duties

for his infatuation with Gaveston, and his downfall is political, demonstrating the tragic reality of power.

The downfall of these protagonists follows a common sequence that turns their desire into their downfall. First comes dissatisfaction. Each protagonist is dissatisfied with their initial situation. Tamburlaine is dissatisfied with his low social status, Faustus with the limitation of conventional knowledge disciplines, Barabas with the loss of his wealth and economic freedom, and Edward with the limitations imposed by political institutions. Then comes self-fashioning or identity construction. Each of them constructs an identity for themselves with their actions, from which they are inseparable. Tamburlaine establishes himself as a conqueror, Barabas as an avenger, and Faustus as an intellectual as well as a magician. On the other hand, Edward imagines himself as an autonomous ruler for whom duty comes only after his gratification. Third comes transgression; each pushes the boundaries of their limits. Then comes temporary success. Tamburlaine becomes successful in conquering kingdoms; Barabas successfully executes his plans, Faustus gains the forbidden knowledge as well as magical power, and Edward for a moment succeeds in having Gaveston. This momentary triumph leads them to isolation. They refuse to leave the way they are on. And in doing so they destroy the very relationship that might help them restrain and, therefore, sustain. Tamburlaine loses Zenocrate; Barabas loses Abigail; Faustus loses touch with his other scholars; and Edward loses Queen Isabel and Gaveston as well as political allies. And at last comes the downfall. Tamburlaine becomes ill and realises that he cannot surpass the bodily limit; Barabas falls into his own trap; Faustus is dragged to hell, and Edward is murdered brutally after being inflicted with ruthless torture.

Marlowe's heroes are some of the most memorable tragic heroes in English literature. They are not merely the playthings of fate. They are not the noble, morally elevated figures brought to their downfall by accident or by reversal of fortune. They themselves are the pioneers

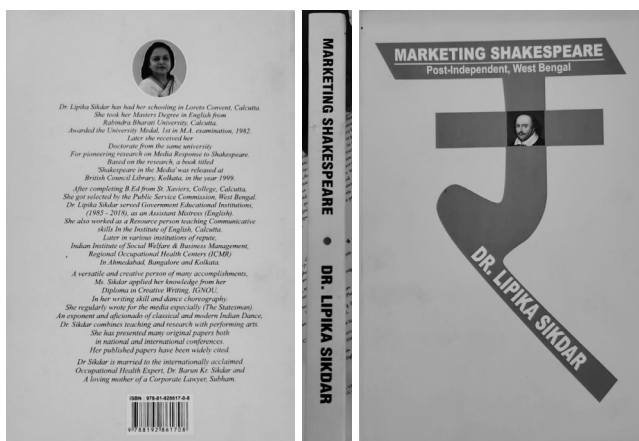
of their downfall. They fall because they want more than life safely offers to them; they push the boundaries of human limitations too hard, try to surpass them, and turn possibility into absolute power. Their downfall is the price of their greatness. They refuse to accept what they have got naturally. Instead, they choose to build their identity according to what they desire. They want command over anything and everything in their lives. Their desire generates their action, action reveals their character, and the character determines the consequence. It is the desire that they carry beyond the limits of their selves that makes their characters compelling, creates the heroic energy, and makes them larger-than-life characters, ultimately becoming the engine of their catastrophe.

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Book Review

by Subham Sikdar



Title: Marketing Shakespeare: Post-Independent, West Bengal

Author: Dr. Lipika Sikdar

Publisher: Avantgarde Press, Kolkata

Year of Publication: 2022

ISBN: 978-81-928617-0-8

INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Marketing Shakespeare: Post-Independent, West Bengal is an ambitious and interdisciplinary study that interrogates a deceptively simple but intellectually rich question: “Is there a market for Shakespeare in post-independent West Bengal?” Dr. Lipika Sikdar approaches this enquiry not merely as a literary scholar but as a cultural historian, media

analyst, and sociologist of literature. The book situates Shakespeare not only as a canonical literary figure but as a **living cultural brand**, embedded in Bengal's academic institutions, performance traditions, print media, popular culture, and collective consciousness.

The work is positioned at the intersection of **Shakespeare studies, cultural economics, postcolonial reception, and media history**, making it distinctive within Indian Shakespeare scholarship. Rather than rehearsing familiar textual interpretations, the author shifts attention to **circulation, consumption, and commodification**, thereby reframing Shakespeare as an enduring economic and symbolic capital in Bengal.

STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

The book is divided into seven chapters, supported by extensive notes, references, media excerpts, and visual appendices. Each chapter examines a different site of “marketing”:

1. Historical entry and colonial legacy
2. Print journalism and conference culture
3. Academic syllabi and book reviews
4. Theatre and stage performances
5. Cinema and visual media
6. Shakespeare societies and institutional networks
7. Concluding economic and cultural synthesis

This compartmentalized structure allows the author to demonstrate how Shakespeare's market presence operates **simultaneously across multiple domains**, reinforcing his longevity and adaptability.

CENTRAL ARGUMENT AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The book's core argument is that **Shakespeare functions as a powerful cultural commodity in post-independent West Bengal**, sustained not by colonial coercion but by **voluntary cultural assimilation, intellectual admiration, and institutional reinforcement**. Dr. Sikdar provocatively uses the language of “marketing” and “lucrative

commodity,” while remaining sensitive to the ethical discomfort such terminology may evoke within literary studies.

Importantly, the author does not reduce Shakespeare to crude commercialism. Instead, she demonstrates that **economic viability and aesthetic reverence coexist**—a coexistence visible in book publishing, theatre festivals, academic conferences, tourism, audio-visual adaptations, and even pandemic-era digital discourse.

USE OF SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

One of the book’s most striking features is its **archival richness**. The author relies extensively on:

- Newspaper articles from *The Statesman*, *Desh*, and other Bengali and English dailies
- Conference proceedings and seminar presentations
- Book reviews spanning several decades
- Personal academic experiences and institutional affiliations
- Visual materials and performance documentation

This methodology foregrounds **reception history** rather than abstract theory. Shakespeare’s presence is traced through *responses*—reviews, debates, adaptations, controversies, syllabi, and performances—making the book an invaluable cultural chronicle.

KEY THEMES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

1. Shakespeare as a Bengali Cultural Phenomenon

Dr. Sikdar convincingly shows how Shakespeare has entered the **Bengali intellectual bloodstream**, comparable to figures like Kalidasa and Tagore. Quotations from Bengali critics, politicians, teachers, doctors, and lawyers illustrate how Shakespeare permeates everyday intellectual life.

2. From Classroom to Boardroom

The book successfully charts Shakespeare's movement from **educational syllabi** to **professional discourse**, including law, medicine, occupational health, management, and public policy—thereby extending Shakespeare beyond literature departments.

3. Performance and Media Economy

The discussion of theatre, film, audio cassettes, televised performances, and folk traditions like *Jatra* highlights how Shakespeare adapts to indigenous performance idioms while retaining commercial viability.

4. Institutional Networks

The chapter on Shakespeare societies demonstrates how **organized cultural bodies** play a crucial role in sustaining scholarly interest, public engagement, and international collaboration—effectively functioning as marketing ecosystems.

5. Pandemic and Digital Afterlife

The Covid-19 sections are particularly insightful, showing how Shakespeare was mobilized as **psychological, ethical, and cultural support** during crisis—reinforcing his relevance even when physical theatres shut down.

STRENGTHS OF THE BOOK

- **Original perspective:** Treating Shakespeare explicitly as a “marketable brand” in postcolonial Bengal is both bold and innovative.
- **Extensive documentation:** The book functions as a repository of Shakespeare reception in Bengal across decades.
- **Interdisciplinary reach:** Literature, economics, media studies, cultural history, and sociology intersect seamlessly.
- **Cultural specificity:** The work is deeply rooted in Bengal's intellectual geography—College Street, Coffee House, theatres, universities.

- **Personal yet scholarly voice:** The author's lived engagement with Shakespeare studies enriches the narrative without undermining academic seriousness.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

While the book's descriptive richness is a major strength, it occasionally comes at the cost of **theoretical synthesis**. Concepts from cultural economics, branding theory, or postcolonial market theory could have been more explicitly articulated. Additionally, tighter editorial refinement would improve linguistic clarity in places.

However, these limitations do not detract significantly from the book's value as a **foundational text** in Indian reception studies.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Marketing Shakespeare: Post-Independent, West Bengal is a **pioneering contribution** to Indian Shakespeare scholarship. It shifts the critical gaze from textual reverence to **cultural circulation**, demonstrating how Shakespeare survives not because of institutional inertia but because he continues to generate meaning, debate, profit, and pleasure.

The book will be of immense value to:

- Scholars of Shakespeare and comparative literature
- Researchers in postcolonial cultural studies
- Historians of print and performance culture
- Students examining literature's relationship with economy and media

Ultimately, Dr. Lipika Sikdar's work affirms that in Bengal, Shakespeare is not a relic of colonial pedagogy but a **dynamic cultural force**, whose market demand—intellectual, emotional, and economic—shows no sign of decline.

Editors

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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.

Editorial Note

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TI VOL. XXIII

UGC-Approved, Biannual, Peer-Reviewed, Multidisciplinary International Journal UGC-CARE LIST form 2017 to February 2025 Arts and Humanities Group I With Crossref Digital Object Identifier (DOI)

**A Feast of Theatre and Performance, Research and Reviews,
Re-looks and Re-presentations.**

Editor-in-Chief & Corresponding Editor Tapu Biswas

≡ UGC-CARE List, 2019					
Sr.No.	Journal Title	Publisher	ISSN	E-ISSN	Action
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

≡ UGC-CARE List, 2022

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

≡ UGC-CARE List, 2024

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436	Theatre International	Avantgarde Press, Tagore-Gandhi Institute/Shakespeare Society	2278-2036	NA	from January - 2020 to Present View



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Web Link :

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ISSN NO: 2278-2036



22782036