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Existence and Distance of Self in Badal Sircar's Plays

Abstract: Badal Sircar's plays have been praised both as texts and in theatres. Although he revolted against the traditional proscenium theatre and launched the revolutionary 'third theatre', his plays are thematically rich and they pose a timeless effect on the audience as well as the reader. The characters portrayed in his plays are taken directly from reality. In them he shows the pangs and hardships of life, futility of existence, distance from self or soul and ultimately a morbid wish to end life. When the protagonists become aware of their meaninglessness of life, they seek to end their life. That is why suicide becomes a recurring image of futility in many plays of Sircar. A dark gloom always lingers upon some of his plays. Apart from these, his plays are full of vivacity, joy of life and hope for mankind. Some popular plays like *Ebong Indrajit*(And Indrajit), *Pagla Ghoda*(Mad Horse), *Baki Itihas*(Remaining History) are discussed with one lesser known play *Bibar*(Cave) which was never staged.

Keywords: Existence, Meaningless Life, Distance, Suicide, Alienated Self, Third Theatre

Post independence Bengali theatre was revolutionized by stalwarts like Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Shambhu Mitra and Rudrapratap Sengupta. They revolutionized the theatre not only technically but also thematically, and their long lasting influence gave the Bengali theatre-goers as well as those people who love drama so much a renewed experience which is quite foreign to them. Utpal Dutt believed that drama means struggle and drama can be the weapon of struggle. His enthusiasm made him one of the foremost practitioners of the political drama in Bengali theatre. Earlier Bijan Bhattacharjee tried his hand in this genre, but in Dutt's hand it became fruitful. Like Sircar, he also believed that drama should be enacted before thousands of weary

labourer, not before few petty middleclass men and women and those who are so called intellectuals. Quiet same view about theatre was expressed by Sircar when he told about his Anganmancha and 'third theatre':

“For third theatre could not be a synthesis of anything if it had to be an alternative theatre. ... third theatre , to be a free theatre should not be costly, immobile or infested with commercialism. It should attempt a dialogue with the audience.”(Sunday Times of India)

Sudhindranath Sircar, known as Badal Sircar was born in Calcutta, on July 15, 1925. Sircar's father was earlier a professor and later he became the principal of Scottish Church College, Calcutta and his mother was Sarla Mona Sircar. After completing his graduation in civil engineering, Badal Sircar started his career as a town planner. Being a believer in simple living high thinking, Badal Sircar had always refused to live life the ordinary middle-class way. During his studentship at the Bengal Engineering College, he joined the undivided Communist Party of India only to be suspended during the turbulent post-1947 period for questioning the leadership. After serving as a civil engineer in India for ten years, Sircar went to study and work in England (1957-59), France (1963) and Nigeria (1964-67). Writing almost all his major proscenium plays in these years, he finally settled down in Kolkata and formed his own group *Satabdi*.

Badal Sircar wrote the 'Third Theatre' plays with a specific purpose. In fact, many of his plays revolve round characters that are so much like him: an educated middle-class Bengali who tries to declass himself, refuses to accept the existing unjust socio-political system and urges others to take an active part in bringing about a radical change in the society. However, not just theatre, he involved himself in making collages, sketching and inventing simple educative games for children and young adults. At an age of retirement, he went to study MA in Comparative literature at Jadavpur University. He visited Thailand again and again and even wrote a travelogue when his age was more than eighty.

Badal Sircar with his deep understanding of the concerns and anxieties of the Indian middle class coupled with his delightful sense of humour and wit, he made an immediate close communication with the people and brought a new energy and excitement to the theatre arena with his large body of plays. He stands out for his innovativeness and the sheer range of his plays

in terms of subjects, forms and styles. He is probably the most translated and staged Indian playwright of the last century. Sircar's *Ebong Indrajit*(And Indrajit), *Pagla Ghoda*(Mad Horse), *Baki Itihas*(Remaining History), *Tringsha Satabdi*(The Thirtieth Century), *Shesh Nei*(There's No End) are some nationwide popular plays.

After some light-hearted comedies, Sircar immediately came with *Ebong Indrajit* (And Indrajit)(1963) which created a storm in the theatre. Satyadev Dubey, in his introduction to *Ebong Indrajit*, praises the play as a milestone in the history of modern Indian drama, as he says:

“With the performance of Sircar's *Ebong Indrajit* in Bengali in Calcutta in September 1965, theatre practitioners all over India became aware of a major talent and a major play. The play provided for them the shock of recognition. It was about the Indian reality as they knew it; it was a theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations gnawing at the hearts of the educated urban middle class.” (Evam Indrajit, VI)

Although it was written in 1963, it was drafted and its poems were composed during 1957-59 in London. This drama poses the story of a middle class man who wants to prove his existence in the vast sea of people but at the same time he seeks a distance from all of them. As everything in this play is vague, Sircar does not provide any list of characters. That is why Lekhak, Amal, Bimal, Kamal and Indrajit—all of them represent that middleclass Bengali youth who tries to choose a distinct path but the path remains the same. Like Camus' Meursalt in *The Stranger*, Indrajit is aimless, as he claims to be petty middleclass man who has love for his life, affection for his loved ones and fear of the dark inevitability of life. He proclaims himself to be 'Nirmal' like Amal, Bimal, and Kamal, but in no time he discards the idea walking through the beaten track of them. He only loves the concept of love derived from his beloved Manasi, but cannot gather courage to break the barriers of social rules because she is his cousin. But he marries another Manasi not out of love but to prove his existence. He even continues his love relationship with Manasi, his cousin, only to walk through the track, because he cannot bear the distance from himself. Like everyone, he has to walk through the track of life because only walking proves that he exists. Lekhak's questions to Masima pose the ultimate reality of the life of every single character in this play. Although the questions are queer, they are worth citing:

LEKHAK : I think —who are we?

MASIMA : Is there anything to think? You are you. Who else can be?

LEKHAK : That's right. We are we. It did not come to my mind. But —what are we?

MASIMA : Hear his words. What are we! All of you are pieces of diamond. You have passed so many exams and have good jobs.

LEKHAK : You are right! Pieces of diamond. I guessed the piece. But that diamond did not come to my mind.

MASIMA: Why do you make such riddles!

LEKHAK : These are really riddles. Puzzles. You have answered two and now answer this one. This is not that easy.

MASIMA : What should I answer?

LEKHAK : Why are we?

MASIMA : Why are you? What does it mean? (Natok Samagra, Vol-I, 290)

These queer questions emphasize the search for the meaning of the middle class life when compared with this limitless cosmos. Men have hardly any existence and ideal happiness proves to be a distant dream. They are nothing when their tiny existence is placed side by side with the mammoth presence of the universe, this entire world. And, at the same moment, worldly happiness and worldly demands dominate their lives. They become so much bounded by those demands that they distance them from themselves. They are chocked by those barriers and they pretend to be contended with what they already have. In this way, their lives become meaningless, their loves turn worthless and they are cursed as lifeless. The playwright scraps out this meaninglessness, worthlessness and lifelessness of existence, love, happiness and satisfaction again and again through Lekhak, Amal, Bimal, Kamal and Indrajit. To them, life is nothing but a math of rotation. And it is an open secret that the answer of this math is zero. So no one has the courage to take the bull by its horn. They always want to cut it short with some easier arrangements of life: "School to college. College and exam. Exam and passed. After that the world." (Natok Samagra, Vol-I, 277)

At the very end of the play, Lekhak says: “Path. We have only path. We will walk. I have nothing to write but I will write. You have nothing to say but you will say. Manasi has nothing to live but Manasi have to live. We have path before us and we will walk.” (Natok Samagra, Vol-I, 310) And Indrajit symbolizes the cycle of life with his reply: “By the curse of Jupiter, the ghost of Sisyphus lifts the heavy rock on the peak of the hill. On reaching the peak the rock rolls down. He lifts it again. It again rolls down and he again lifts.” (Natok Samagra, Vol-I, 311) This drama has also no end like the heavy rock of the ghost of the Sisyphus. This drama is also a continuous parallel track like the path laid before Lekhak or Indrajit or every middleclass youth. Its end is just a new beginning of it just like a racing track. Thus, everyone have to watch it or read it again and again to understand the ultimate meaning of life fully.

The protagonist of *Baki Itihas*(Remaining History)(1965), it can be said, is modeled on the character of Indrajit. Like Indrajit, Sharadindu is also a collage or blended type character, although there are various dissimilarities. As the ultimate truth and reality is blurred in Sircar’s dramatic technique of myth making, this play provides the spectators and the characters a vantage point. Sharadindu, a middleclass man, with his presentable social position, can be called a successful man. He is a professor of literature and his wife Basanti is a storywriter with some fame. Thus, their family can be called a creative one and Sircar makes usage of this creativity fully. Basanti searches for a well-knit plot to write a story and she is suggested by Sharadindu to write a story about certain Sitanath Chackraborty, whose suicide report is published on the newspaper. That half known name created commotion in the life of Sharadindu as he vaguely recalls the meeting with Sitanath’s family at Botanical Garden some months before.

Sircar’s deep mediation on the nature of death was excited by news of a man’s suicide read in France In his diary written on 23th January 1964, he scrawled his ideas in random ways, “A picture comes. A story of man’s suicide read in a newspaper. An imagination – first scene, the wife’s opinion. Second imagination – second scene. And the last scene – the version of the ghost of the dead” (Prabaser Hijibiji, 230). The whole story is an enactment of a creative process happening within the mind of Sircar. Sircar himself becomes the character in this play. Sharad and Vasanti are none but Sircar himself.

Sircar creates a multi dimensional reality and searches the root cause of Sitanath’s suicide. In first version of Sitanath’s story, Basanti pens a reliable cause of his anxiety, his worst

situation in life and ultimate withdrawal of himself from life. Here, Sitanath is a petty middleclass man in search of the familial happiness and he tries hard to build a house of his own. He accumulates money and his wife, Kona feels secured at the prospect of a new house. But the horrible truth is revealed when the man from the court came to their house. Sitanath admits to his wife that he spent all his money for a secret principle — the secret about his father-in-law. His wife immediately leaves him with no hope to live. But this story can hardly impress Sharadindu and he builds another kind of artificial reality. In this version, Sitanath is a secretly perverted man who punishes his student for reading *Lolita* in the classroom. He rusticates that student and remains strict to his principle as a headmaster. But he could not escape from his perverted mind and at once recalls the bloody and scandalous past of his life. He recalls the rape of Parbati several years ago and admits that Parbati has returned in the shape of Gouri. To save his dear one, to save the humanity from his own perverted teeth and talons, he decides to end his life.

But the reality strikes in the last version of Sitanath's story and it is revealed in the nightmare or the subconscious of Sharadindu. Sharadindu is surprised when he encounters the familial similarities of his daily life with that of Sitanath's. He tries to refuse them but he is compelled to stand before the mirror where he finds out the image of Sitanath as a kind of alter ego. He realizes his heritage, his past, the past of inhumanity and they are not easy to escape. The futile existence of life and distance from their alienated soul bring both Sitanath and Sharadindu vis-à-vis and they could not differentiate themselves from each other. In real life they are masked to hide themselves from the fear of history —remaining history. They only pretend to be happy with a pseudo financial stability, a laughable ideal of familial happiness and an alienation from the past heritage full of cruelty. They simply cannot escape from this death-in-life situation and Sharadindu becomes gradually aware of this 'half in love with easeful death' situation. Sitanath defines history as the "history of meaninglessness of thousands of years. History of meaninglessness of thousands of men, of thousands of insects." (Natok Samagra, Vol-II, 94) And Sharadindu becomes one of those men or insects— only a mere part of history.

SITANATH: They are all men and women. Like you. Like me. All of them are trying to live by finding a meaning of life.

SHARADINDU: Yet aren't they living?

SITANATH: Pretending to live. When there is no meaning, they pretend to live relying on habits. As I had did. As you are doing. (Natok Samagra, Vol-II, 94)

Sharadindu was saved at last by Basudeb, his colleague, who gave him the news of his promotion as an assistant professor. But this catastrophic end only brings him back to his usual habits and the fear of ignoring the history. He just seeks to forget history as ‘a worst false meaningless nightmare’ and tries to be happy in his promotion.

Pagla Ghoda(Mad Horse)(1967) can be traced as a different theatrical experience, but the same theme of distance from self and the futility of existence runs like an undercurrent throughout the play. A similar four types of men are chosen to represent different culture, class, mentality and profession —Shashi, Satu, Kartick and Himadri. Despite the difference of their age and social standpoint, they are driven by the same fuel of unrequited love and woven by the same regrets and yearning for that love. When the thin lines of formality are broken they cannot keep the distance and all of them become permeated with their same regrettable past. Plain actuality, coarse demands of the mundane world dwarf their passion and wishes, and they now turn as an uncontrollable rush — mad horse.

They gathered in crematorium to burn the pyre of a half known girl. They were playing cards as their pastime and everyone proposed to drink some wine, except Himadri. In this hobnob, the ghost of the dead girl comes to them and requests them to reveal their respective love stories one by one. But the spectators watch different love stories which can be said more as stories of heartbreak. The living ones try to find out the story of the dead girl while the dead one forces them to recall their past. And in this way, they, including the girl, feel the bursting speed of mad horse which can hardly be controlled. They find out the void created in their lives by unrequited love, and the meaninglessness and futility of their lives. The dead girl becomes Malati to Shashi, Lachhmi to Satu and Mili to Himadri. They, including Himadri, try to quench their thirst of love by wine, and the girl laughs at them. Their dear beloveds are standing at an unattainable distance and they can only wait for ending of their meaningless existence of lives.

Kartick’s story is differently painted as he loved the dead girl. He recalls the girl’s question : “Why do people want to live? What do they get?” (Natok Samagra, Vol-I, 435) His

confession to the ghost leaves the girl shell-shocked. Out of heartbreak, he decides to end his life by mixing poison in his glass of wine. However, the catastrophe of the play is an optimistic one like the weak but vital reply of Kartick : “If one lives — everything is possible.” (Natok Samagra, Vol-I, 438) People live with a hope that something new and better would happen one day. The best of life is yet to come and never loose your hope. In the gloomy lights of the burning pyres, Kartick discards the idea of suicide by draining the poison of the wine glass and follows that ultimate silver lining of hope. Sartre admitted that “Suicide is an absurdity which causes my life to be submerged in absurd” (Being & Nothingness, 690). For existentialist, death in the form of suicide is the temptation of an illusionary freedom from nihilism. Actually, suicide is an escape from the battle. The redemption lies in the futile struggle with a conscious dissatisfaction and simultaneous rejection. Thus Sisyphus who is embodiment of metaphysical rebellion never commits suicide. Both Sharadindu in *Baki Itihas* and Kartick in *Pagla Ghoda* can be enlisted in this category. When Sircar was asked about this recurring suicide theme of his plays, he answered that it happened with very few plays and “even though they have suicide these are not pessimistic plays. They are full of life. They do not propagate suicide. It occurs simply because it fits into the framework of the play.” (Sunday Times of India)

To show the distance from alienated self and futile existence, *Bibar (Cave)*(1967) can be cited as proper play. This play is an adaptation of a famous novel by Samaresh Basu bearing the same name. Sircar read the novel at Enugu, Africa and started writing it on 31st December and ended on 1st January 1968. He never staged it because the novel was charged with giving explicit sexual details. He told about this drama to the novelist, and he praised Sircar for a faithful dramatization and it was ultimately published after a long forty years.

The central character, Prodyut is a third grade officer of a bank, and lives a carefree life. He is well aware that this living is not a proper living because there is no freedom. He well understands the false caring of his secret and infamous beloved, Nita Roy. Neglecting his work, he joins with Kumaresh to drink in a bar. He confesses that he does not even know the name of the bar girl, as he recalls her as Dora or Clara. His attitude to Nita is not less dirty than Ruby Dutt, a high class prostitute. But his philosophy of life poses the questions of existence: “I have feared freedom like fire. I have feared to express the freedom of my wish. I have taken shelter in a cave— passing my life by telling lies, like others. None of us speak the truth, truly behave, and

so everyone finds their cave and becomes drunken by the parasitic happiness.” (Natok Samagra, Vol-III, 358)

He leaves at a stroke his ancestral house, murders his beloved, is sacked from his decent job and avoids all sense of social duties and obligation. He becomes aware of his own freedom, and to prove his existence he is prepared to do anything. Otherwise, Prodyut is in a self-destructive mood and he is now able to reduce distance from his own free self. Camus has explained this rebellion for those who destroy self. In *The Rebel* he says, “Hatred for the creator can turn to hatred of creation or to exclusive and defiant love of what exists. But in both cases it ends in murder. ... Apparently there are rebels who want to die and those who want to cause death. But they are identical, consumed with the desire for life, frustrated by their desire and therefore preferring generalized injustice to mutilate justice.”(The Rebel, 73)

In the existential philosophy, the distance of self and soul and awareness of futility of human life are the final stages of the ‘definite awakening’. Camus illustrates the destiny of the war between man and the universe in the following ways, “Weariness comes at the end of the act of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return to the chain or it’s a definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time the consequence: suicide or recovery.”(The Myth of Sisyphus, 19)

Notes

1.English translation of quotations from the plays used in this essay are mine. They are done directly from Bengali edition of plays.

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